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February 2025

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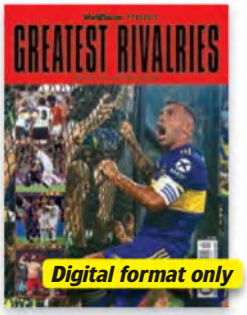

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Global football intelligence since 1960

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February 2025

IN THIS ISSUE...

Welcome to the first *World Soccer* of 2025.

This issue is focused on the future, with our global network of football experts picking 50 of the best young talents on the planet. Remember the names – you'll be hearing them again.

Indeed, many of them may well be in action at the 2034 World Cup, which recently had Saudi Arabia confirmed as its host by FIFA. We sent Samindra Kunti to Riyadh for the announcement.

As well as looking forwards, there's also space to wrap up a number of the domestic league campaigns that concluded at the end of 2024.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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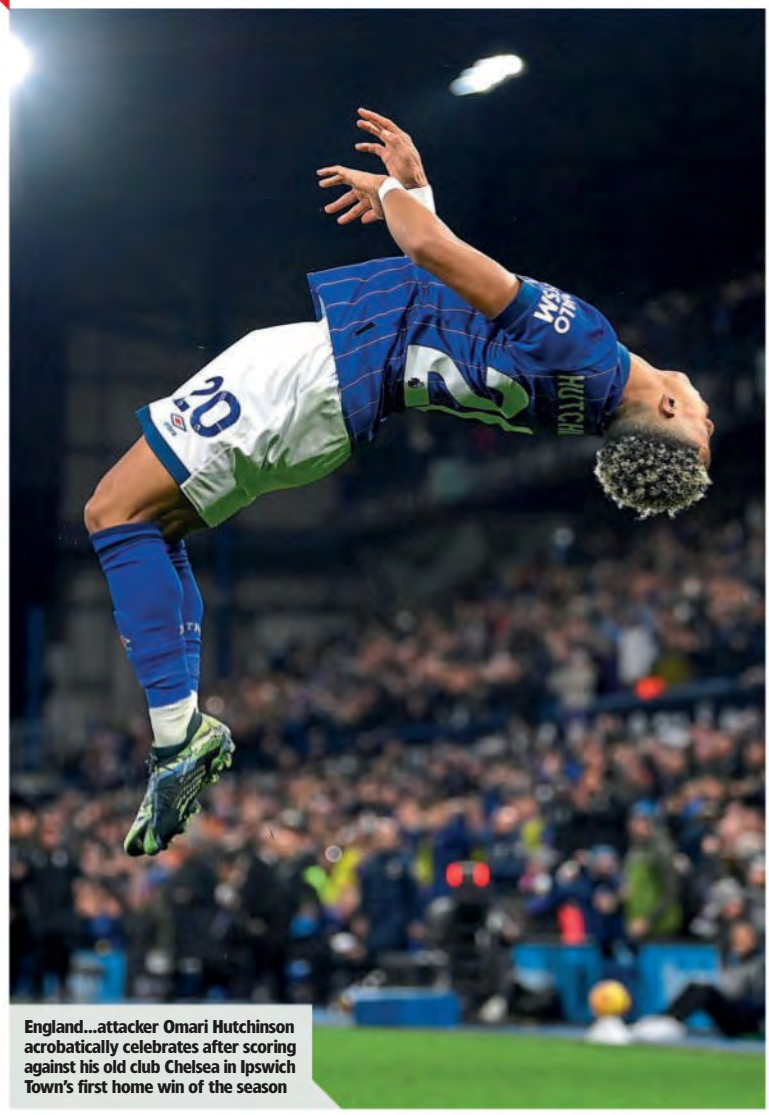
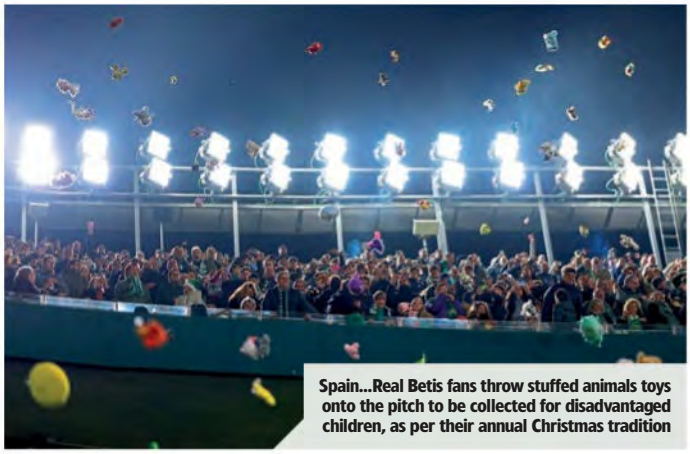


England...attacker Omari Hutchinson acrobatically celebrates after scoring against his old club Chelsea in Ipswich Town's first home win of the season

England...three weeks after scoring a dramatic winner at Manchester City, Amad Diallo nets a late goal v another of Manchester United's arch-rivals in a pulsating 2-2 draw with Liverpool

France...Paris Saint-Germain keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma suffers a boot to the face in a Ligue 1 clash against Monaco



Spain...Real Betis fans throw stuffed animals toys onto the pitch to be collected for disadvantaged children, as per their annual Christmas tradition

Italy...Roma and Lazio players clash during January's Rome derby, which Roma won 2-0

France...fourth-tier side Le Puy celebrate after thumping Ligue 1 strugglers Montpellier 4-0 in the Coupe de France

United States... LA Galaxy's Joseph Paintsil pays tribute to injured team-mate Riqui Puig during the MLS Cup final *(more on page 76)*

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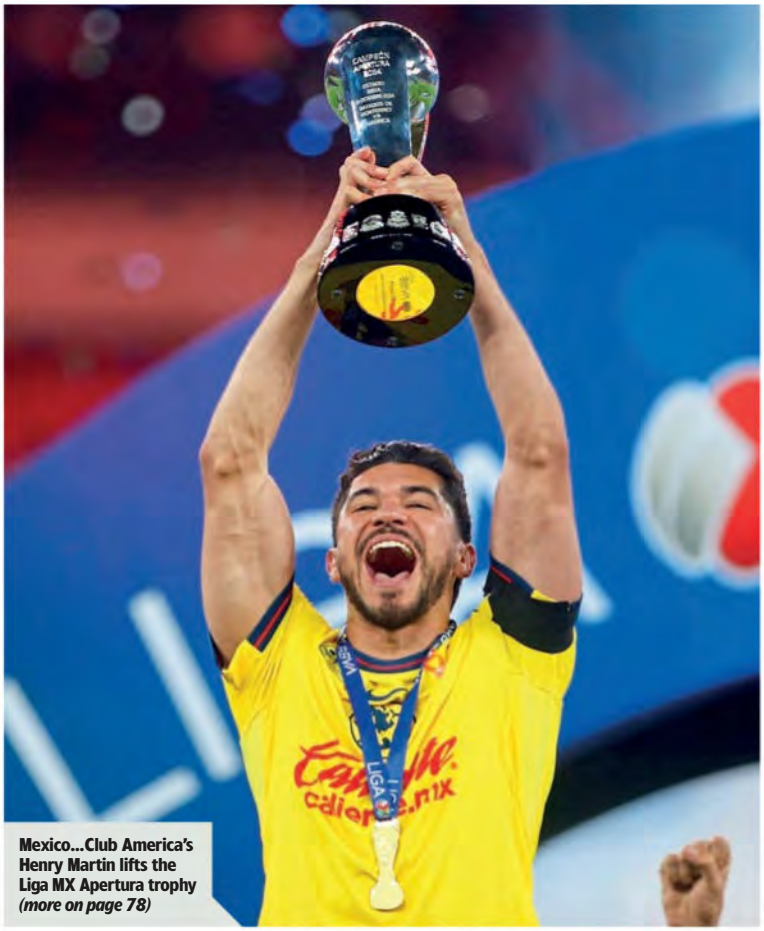
Brazil...Botafogo players hold the Copa Libertadores and Brazilian league trophies *(more on page 70)*

Brazil...Cruzeiro unveil a banner of new signing Gabriel Barbosa, who recently joined the club from Flamengo



Mexico...Club America's Henry Martin lifts the Liga MX Apertura trophy *(more on page 78)*

Vietnam...a Vietnam supporter watches his team in the final of the ASEAN Championship *(more on page 84)*

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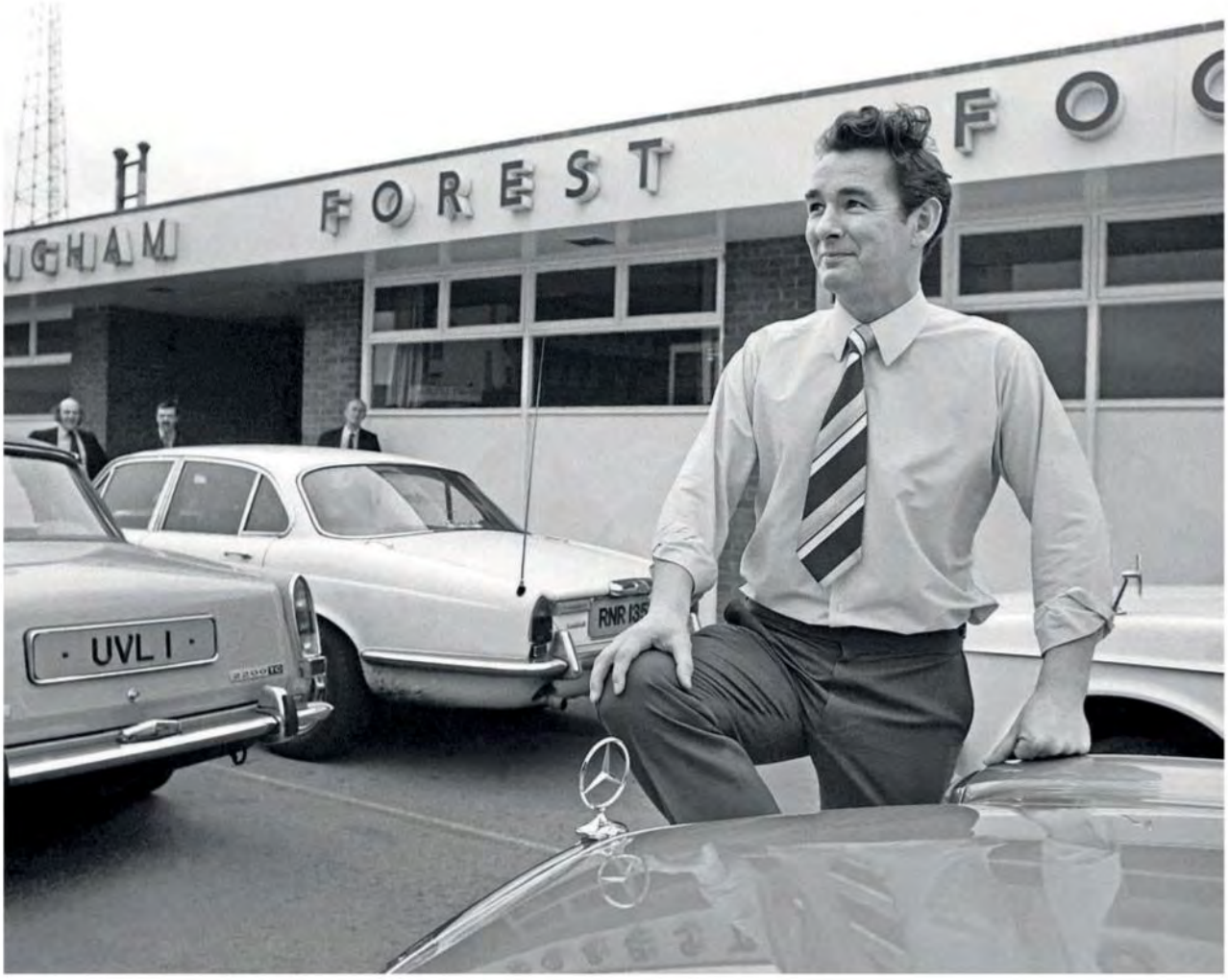
Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

The marathon FA Cup tie, 50 years on



First day on the job ...Clough arrives at Nottingham Forest in January 1975

Brian Clough was never short of a great quote. When Nottingham Forest faced an exhausting third replay of their FA Cup fourth-round meeting with Fulham 50 years ago, Clough declared: "It's just a slogging match now." They'd played on waterlogged pitches and through two spells of extra-time. They'd managed four goals in five-and-a-half hours between them. It was a muddy, month-long marathon.

"If one of us doesn't win on Monday," Clough added, "they should line all the players up against a wall and shoot them." Shootouts did eventually come in but, fortunately, not in the way the irreverent Clough jokingly envisaged.

A stroll down memory lane often provides insight into the present. As well as its length, what made that 1975 fixture noteworthy was its significance in the history of both clubs, and the lessons for today. Forest and Fulham were mid-table second-tier clubs who suddenly dared to dream.

"Hurricane Clough Blows into City Ground" read the headlines as he arrived in January 1975, followed by a media pack eager for quotes and rarely disappointed. Clough transformed Forest. Gates were poor, averaging 12,000. The club was in a mess financially. Facilities were underfunded. They needed a miracle worker. And now they had one. Clough forked out himself to buy the kitchen staff a new fridge and cooker. He restored John Robertson, Martin O'Neill and Tony Woodcock to the side. John McGovern and John O'Hare came in.

Clough was the master man-

manager, taking Forest up, taking them to the title, and to back-to-back European Cups. Is that possible now? The odds are stacked against Champions League glory but good recruitment and man-management as embodied by Clough can carry teams far. It's a journey that Nuno Espirito Santo is trying to take the current Forest side on. Nuno's people skills, softer than Clough's, and some smart work in the transfer market lifted Forest into the Champions League positions. Forest celebrated the 50th anniversary of Clough's appointment with a commanding 3-0 victory at Molineux.

For Fulham, their FA Cup run 50 years ago is currently ranked third in the club's "50 Moments That Made Fulham". Alec Stock's side had already needed three games to see off Hull City in the third round, and then the first game with Forest at Craven Cottage was delayed because of heavy rain. Ground staff worked to get the tie on, but it was eventually a gruelling stalemate on a rutted pitch on January 28.

Replay No.1 finished 1-1 after extra-time at the City Ground on February 3. Money thoughts – not simply a modern-day obsession – then intervened. Both clubs privately agreed that a neutral venue would generate less income so persuaded the FA that a coin toss should decide the venue for Replay No.2.

Tommy Trinder, Fulham's charismatic chairman, represented them in the toss and lived up to his "you lucky people" catchphrase by winning the coin toss, so it was all back to the Cottage for the replay. A Robertson free-kick kept Forest in the lengthening tie, taking both teams back to the Trent from the Thames.

Robertson became a symbol of Clough's genius for getting the best out of players. He believed in a player he described in his autobiography as "scruffy, unfit, uninterested waste of time...but something told me he was worth persevering with". Robertson responded time and again down the left wing.

Will another Clough ever come along? A maverick who marches to his own tune? You could see why he approved of the young Jose Mourinho. Yet a Clough nowadays would struggle as they would have to be able to work with sporting directors and chairmen, and sensitive players.

And so to Replay No.3. Clough's side were ultimately frustrated by Bobby Moore skilfully organising Fulham's defensive resistance and Viv Busby scoring twice in front of 23,240 at the City Ground on February 28, 1975. So after three replays Moore, and Alan Mullery, guided Fulham into the fifth round.

FA Cup replays seem a distant memory. The heavy workload brought on by replays played into the hands of those at the FA who gradually phased them out for the elite. They should, of course, have kept them for teams in rounds one and two not affected by European schedules anyway, but also in the third round where the big boys and underdogs merge. The jeopardy of a replay adds to the drama of the draw, and the possibility of a further pay-day for those down the pyramid. But the Trent-Thames marathon is simply not possible in the crammed modern calendar or acceptable in an age of player welfare.

Will another Clough ever come along? A maverick who marches to his own tune?

After emerging from the Forest tie, Fulham had only five days before facing Everton at Goodison Park in the fifth round. Overplaying was an issue. "The players need a complete break," Stock said. "It has taken us seven games to reach the fifth round."

They then beat Everton and Carlisle United before requiring a replay to get past Birmingham City in the semi-finals. Fulham still hold the record for most FA Cup matches played to reach the final – 11. Their road to Wembley took them via Boothferry Park, Filbert Street (for the Hull replay), the City Ground (twice), Goodison Park, Brunton Park, Hillsborough and Maine Road (for the semi and replay) as well as the Cottage three times. They travelled 3,070 miles.

After the last ten-mile stretch to the stadium, Fulham then lost the Wembley final against Moore's old West Ham United team-mates, the last occasion when the Cup has been won by a team just containing English players (and sub Bobby Gould).

A different era, in so many ways.

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our weekly newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

Deschamps' departure

Didier Deschamps is a rare breed of legend for captaining his team, France, to the 1998 World Cup and 2000 European Championship and then managing them to glory in the 2018 World Cup.

Deschamps has announced he will step down as France coach after the 2026 World Cup and deserves all the plaudits. With one caveat: farewell tours for managers rarely work. France's players know their leader is leaving, and his successor will be known long before then. Is the favourite, Zinedine Zidane, prepared to wait? Also, is there always the same intensity in the squad when everyone can hear the clock ticking down on a managerial era?

Some France supporters felt Deschamps should have gone after last summer's Euros, where his ambitions were undoubtedly stymied by Kylian Mbappe's broken nose. He has such a strong squad that reaching the semi-finals was par, and losing to Spain, the best team in the tournament, was no disgrace. But some of the *élan* had evaporated from France. He may re-find the spark to inspire *Les Bleus* to another World Cup final but their fans will hope it is not a tournament too far.

France legend ...Deschamps lifts the 2018 World Cup

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Looking ahead to 2025

The big talking points that will come under the spotlight in the year ahead

MANCHESTER CITY

Plenty will be written and said about Manchester City's on-field strife following their major dip in form this season, but nothing will speak to the elite world of professional football in 2025 like the final verdict on the Premier League's case against the club. The year should bring at least the beginning of the end of the saga.

Two years have elapsed since City were charged with more than 100 alleged breaches of the Premier League's financial rules across nine different seasons. The charges cover the first decade of Sheikh Mansour's ownership, covering three league title wins as well as an FA Cup and three League Cups. City denied all wrongdoing at the hearing before a three-man panel that kicked off in September at the International Dispute Resolution Centre in London and ended 12 weeks later in early December. A verdict is expected some time this spring, although an appeal from either side following the judgment would drag things out for several months more.

The case itself arises out of the contradictions within today's Premier League. The original breakaway was fashioned at the start of the 1990s amid the enthusiasm for neoliberal, trickledown economics. This also brought a populist-driven imbalance between football's haves and have-nots.

Jerome Champagne railed against this brave new world in his FIFA presidential campaign in 2016 but few took much notice. UEFA has cut a larger share of its Champions League cake for the modest majority in clubland but an even larger financial slice than ever before for the elite. Hence the introduction of rules to preserve some semblance of competition.

Here is the nub of the problem: which rules may be deemed fair and which may be deemed arbitrary? By whom? By the clubs, by the leagues, by a so-called independent regulator or by the law of the land? Should clubs rebuilt in a sporting world of international investment (not to mention sportswashing) be restricted in their ambitions? What is fair competition and, in any case, should competition be fair?

The Manchester City case is about all of this and more. Whatever the verdict, appeals are guaranteed. Incidentally, Premier League clubs cannot go to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), as City did against UEFA in 2020; though, if need be, City might feel even that stipulation worth challenging. It could be the end of the year before the fog clears.

Decision time... Manchester City

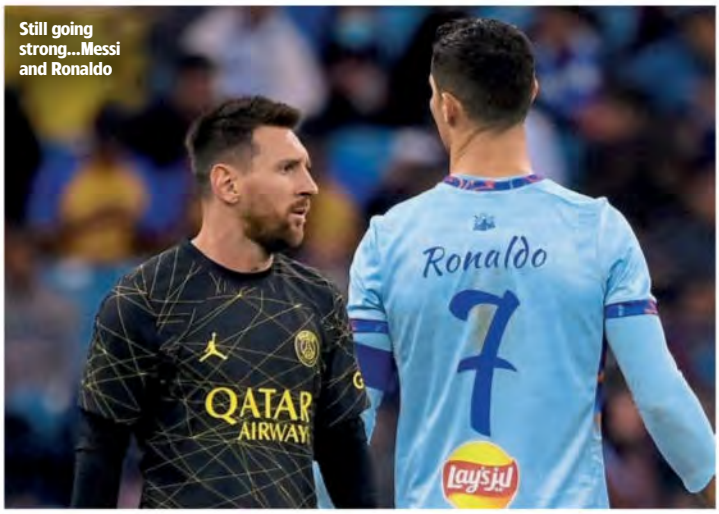
> Ever since swapping Nyon for Zurich, Gianni Infantino has wanted to convert the old, unsatisfactory Club World Cup into a shiny, new vehicle for clubs from every corner of the FIFA empire

THE CLUB WORLD CUP

FIFA has long envied UEFA and its goose that lays the golden eggs, also known as the Champions League. No one appreciates it more than Gianni Infantino himself since the FIFA president – as the European federation's general secretary from 2009 to 2015 – had worked long and hard to help cement the Champions League as a focus of not only European but worldwide magnetism.

Ever since swapping Nyon for Zurich, Infantino has wanted to

Up for grabs... the new-look Club World Cup trophy



Still going strong...Messi and Ronaldo

convert the old, unsatisfactory Club World Cup into a shiny, new vehicle for clubs from every corner of the FIFA empire. His dream will become a reality in the United States in June and July.

Few are happy. Infantino's many critics excoriate his empire-building strategy, complaining that FIFA should concentrate solely on national team competition and keep its acquisitive nose out of the club game; world players' union FIFPro has complained about the extra physical and mental pressures on players; while even the likes of Real Madrid and Manchester City have expressed doubts about the money and the scheduling squeeze.

Football's competitive logic supports the concept of a club world championship. But only once every four years? That sounds more like an exhibition tournament rather than a serious addition to the club calendar. The jury may still be out when the final whistle sounds in East Rutherford, New Jersey on July 13. Lucky or unlucky for football?

SUPERSTAR ETERNITY

Once upon a time, a player was heading down the long and winding road into footballing oblivion (or management, often the same thing) once they celebrated their 30th birthday. The knees began to give way, their touch began to fail them, their reflexes began to dull, their pace began to wane. Modern sporting science has changed all that.

Now, a footballer turned 30 is in their prime (just look at the form and continued goal output of the likes of Harry Kane, Mohamed Salah and Robert Lewandowski). With dedication, plus a little good fortune on the injury front, careers can be extended towards a realm once ruled only by the exceptional likes of a Stanley Matthews.

Consider Cristiano Ronaldo – who astonishingly turns 40 in early February – and Lionel Messi at 37: the two greatest footballers of the 21st century are still leading clubs and countries. Playing out their club days in Saudi Arabia and the United States respectively is one way in which they are managing to extend their value to their national teams, whatever the sniping about selfish personal goals and records.

If you, the football fan, have the opportunity to watch either of them in the flesh this year, then do so. Football is lucky to still have them.

FIFA

Finally, to the burning question that torments doyens of the international media whose business is tracking Gianni Infantino's every single flight by private jet: is the FIFA president really an avatar? The question grows ever more intriguing since Infantino opted to communicate with his worldwide constituency only by video and to scrap press conferences.

Of course, answering real questions from real people in a real setting rather than delivering tablets of electronic words may be considered anachronistic. After all, the old-fashioned written press is little more than nuisance value when TV delivers so many eyeballs and dollars. But presenting yourself as a real, live human being does matter. It's about personal credibility.

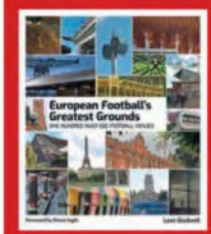
Infantino may still hurt from the scornful blows heaped on his peroration before the Qatar kick-off in 2022. Well, anyone can have a bad day at the office. So here is one more intriguing puzzle for the Club World Cup: will Infantino show up in person before kick-off to engage with the press? Perhaps, even: "Today, I feel American..."

Video broadcast... Infantino speaks at the latest FIFA Congress

BOOKS THIS MONTH

UNDER THE FLOODLIGHTS!
By Rob Carless (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Under the Floodlights! is the fascinating story of the English League Cup, charting the competition's rich history through 64 seasons, with insightful contributions from the people who were there – players, supporters, managers, journalists and match officials. As the competition approaches its 65th anniversary, this book brings you the full, untold story.



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL'S GREATEST GROUNDS
By Leon Gladwell (Pitch Publishing, £35)

Having made 71 journeys across Europe – from Armenia to the Arctic Circle – and clocking up more than 130,000 miles by public transport, football ground historian and amateur photographer Leon Gladwell offers a bucket list of places to watch football. This first-of-its-kind book introduces the reader to a diverse and often breathtaking range of venues, telling both the visual and written stories of the stadiums and the people who made them.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Spain's second golden age

Spanish football is at the forefront of the global game more than ever before

The first great age of Spanish football came to an end on June 13, 2014. With Spain 1-0 up against the Netherlands through a Xabi Alonso penalty as half-time approached, Robin van Persie met Daley Blind's raking cross behind the Spanish line with an extraordinary diving header, hurling himself forward as he shaped his effort over Iker Casillas from the edge of the box. What had seemed like a routine Spain win was suddenly transformed. Van Persie and Arjen Robben ran amok, devastating Spain to the extent that the final 5-1 scoreline didn't seem an entirely true reflection of their dominance.

Spain were the reigning world champions and had also won the previous two Euros, but as they lost their following game 2-0 to Chile, they were eliminated from the Brazil World Cup in the group stage. Perhaps it was true, as said, that a certain hunger and desire had gone, but there was also a feeling that the world had caught up with *juego de posición* and the tactical advantage they had enjoyed had gone.

There had been some warning signs at club level. Pep Guardiola, after taking over at Barcelona in 2008, had popularised the approach and shown the remarkable lengths to which it could be taken. In his final season at Barcelona, 2011-12, they had lost in the Champions League semi-final to Chelsea, unable to break down a deep-lying defence and caught on the break. In the following season's semi-final, Barcelona, by then under Tito Vilanova, had been hammered 7-0 over two legs by Bayern, undone on the counter-attack and by set-plays.

In the months before the World Cup, Barcelona had lost in the Champions League quarter-final to a deep-lying Atletico Madrid, while Guardiola's Bayern had lost 5-0 on aggregate in the semi-final to a counter-attacking Real Madrid. To suggest that possession football was over, that the Guardiola method had somehow become outmoded, was to stretch the point but it was perhaps true that opponents had become more comfortable with the idea of being without the ball for long periods of the game.

Golden age... Spain is football's dominant force

> This is a level of continent-wide dominance that Spain didn't achieve even in their first golden age

Spain and that style of Spanish football didn't disappear, but it became just one mode among many. But over the last year, Spain have won the Euros, Real Madrid have won the Champions League again, the reigning champions of England, Germany and France are managed by Spaniards, while no fewer than four Premier League clubs are managed by Spaniards. This is a level of continent-wide dominance that Spain didn't achieve even in their first golden age.

Quite how much credit Spain can take for Real Madrid's success is debatable, given their last six Champions Leagues have been won under Zinedine Zidane and Carlo Ancelotti, while Spanish representation on the pitch is limited to a right-back and a raft of squad players, yet it does add to a sense of Spain being at the centre of the footballing world.

Elsewhere, the vast influence of Spanish football is not just profound but strikingly varied.

End of an era... the 2014 World Cup ended the first age of Spanish dominance

In total, 23 Spanish managers have been appointed in the Premier League, more than any other nationality outside the UK. The four current Spaniards in England's top flight represent very different ways of playing the game. Guardiola, for all his recent struggles, is the most influential coach of the century, having made *juego de posición* almost a default for elite sides across the world. Mikel Arteta, although in some ways a Guardiola acolyte, has developed a more conservative style that has given new life to set-plays. Andoni Iraola prefers a direct attacking style, with aggressive man-to-man pressing that shows the influence of his time under Marcelo Bielsa, while Unai Emery also favours a high line but is more flexible and pragmatic. Alonso at Bayer Leverkusen and Luis Enrique at Paris Saint-Germain represent different styles again, even if there is a basic insistence on technical excellence and pressing where possible.

The stereotype of Spanish football, at least as the national team's fortunes dipped, was of endless passing with very little end product. The success of Spain under Luis de la Fuente at the Euros last summer was to graft onto the technical accomplishment the explosive impact of two direct wingers in Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams. After England had equalised in the final, Spain were able to draw the sting of the game, protecting possession so any momentum gained after Cole Palmer's goal dissipated, but they also had a direct threat; teams couldn't just retreat into a low block to frustrate them.

This seemed a significant development, a move away from the ideological insistence on a short-passing possession-oriented game to something more flexible. With Rodri's importance only growing more evidence as Manchester City have struggled, Yamal enjoying remarkable success as a teenager and Barcelona's domination of the women's game, Spanish football is arguably more dominant now, certainly flexible and adaptable, than it was in its golden age. The second era of Spain may turn out to be even richer than the first.

2025 Calendar

FEBRUARY

1 African Nations Championship begins
3 Winter transfer window closes
4 CONCACAF Champions Cup begins
10 Copa Libertadores preliminaries
11 UEFA Champions League play-offs
12 Under-20 Asian Cup begins
21 UEFA Women's Nations League begins
22 MLS season begins
28 African Nations Championship final

MARCH

1 Under-20 Asian Cup final
3 Asian Champions League knockouts
4 UEFA Champions League knockouts
16 English League Cup final
17 South American & African 2026 World Cup qualifying continues
20 Asian 2026 World Cup qualifying third round continues
UEFA Nations League quarter-finals
CONCACAF Nations League semi-finals
21 European 2026 World Cup qualifying group stage begins
Oceania 2026 World Cup qualifying concludes
23 CONCACAF Nations League final
25 2027 Asian Cup qualifying third round group stage begins
28 African Champions League knockouts
30 Oceania Champions League begins

Knockout rounds...UEFA Champions League crunch time

APRIL

2 Copa Libertadores group stage begins
12 Oceania Champions League final
26 Spanish Cup final
Under-20 AFCON begins

MAY

4 African Champions League final
11 Women's Super League final day
14 Italian Cup final
17 FA Cup final
Bundesliga & Ligue 1 final days
18 Under-20 AFCON final
21 Europa League final
24 Asian Champions League final 1st leg
UEFA Women's Champions League final
Serie A & La Liga final days
German Cup & French Cup finals
EFL Play-Off finals (through to 26th)
25 Premier League final day
28 Conference League final
31 UEFA Champions League final

JUNE

1 CONCACAF Champions Cup final
Asian Champions League final 2nd leg
3 UEFA Nations League finals begin
4 CONCACAF 2026 World Cup qualifying second round continues
8 UEFA Nations League final
10 Asian 2026 World Cup qualifying third round concludes
11 U21 European Championship begins
14 CONCACAF Gold Cup begins
15 Club World Cup begins
28 U21 European Championship final

JULY

2 Women's Euro 2025 begins
6 CONCACAF Gold Cup final
7 East Asian (EAFF) Championship begins
12 Women's Copa America begins
13 Club World Cup final
16 East Asian (EAFF) Championship final
27 Women's Euro 2025 final

AUGUST

2 Women's Copa America final
9 FA Community Shield
12 Copa Libertadores knockouts
13 UEFA Super Cup
16 2025-26 Premier League season begins

SEPTEMBER

1 CONCACAF 2026 World Cup qualifying third round begins
South American 2026 World Cup qualifying concludes
27 Under-20 World Cup begins

OCTOBER

6 African 2026 World Cup qualifying first round concludes
8 Asian 2026 World Cup qualifying fourth round begins
19 Under-20 World Cup final
20 UEFA Women's Nations League finals

NOVEMBER

5 Under-17 World Cup begins
10 African 2026 World Cup qualifying second round begins
CONCACAF 2026 World Cup qualifying concludes
13 Asian 2026 World Cup qualifying fifth round
16 European 2026 World Cup qualifying group stage concludes
22 Copa Sudamericana final
26 UEFA Women's Nations Lg final 1st leg
27 Under-17 World Cup final
29 Copa Libertadores final

DECEMBER

2 UEFA Women's Nations Lg final 2nd leg
21 AFCON 2025 begins

OBITUARIES

World Cup winner ...Eastham during the 1966 finals

George EASTHAM (1936–2024)
The Blackpool-born inside-left was not only a member of England's 1966 World Cup-winning squad but a man who forced the first chinks in the old "retain and transfer" system.

Eastham won 19 England caps but was an unused squad member at both the 1962 and 1966 World Cup finals.

Notably, he "starred" in a 1963 court case over players' rights following his transfer from Newcastle to Arsenal. As a result, he succeeded in helping to reform the British transfer market.

After the 1966 World Cup, Eastham joined Stoke and scored their winner in the 1972 League Cup final defeat of Chelsea, before having a brief spell as Potters manager in the late 1970s.

Dietmar CONSTANTINI (1955–2024)
After a modest playing career, "Didi" enjoyed two decades as a coach. He was Austria's caretaker manager twice and spent 18 months in full charge of the national team from 2009 to 2011.

Former Austria coach...Constantini

Josef JELINEK (1941–2024)
Jelinek was a speedy left-winger in the Czechoslovakia team that finished World Cup runners-up to Brazil in 1962. The last survivor of their XI that lined up in Santiago, Jelinek scored two goals in ten international appearances but always claimed it should have been three. In the World Cup final he was denied by a goal-line handball by Djalma Santos unseen by referee Nikolay Latyshev.

At club level, he won five league titles and three cups with the dominant army club Dukla Prague. He wound down his career in the second tier with Chomutov, in Netherlands with Go Ahead Eagles then back home with Bohemians.

Hiroshi KAGAWA (1924–2024)
Kagawa starred in attack for Osaka SC in the early 1950s before building a notable career as a sports journalist which included covering ten World Cups. He was voted into the Japan Football Hall of Fame in 2010.

Barcelona star...Sotil alongside Johan Cruyff and Johan Neeskens

Lucjan BRYCHCZY (1934–2024)
Brychczy scored 18 goals in 58 games for Poland between 1954 and 1969, with another 182 in 368 club appearances while winning four league titles and four domestic cups with Legia Warsaw. A minute's silence was observed in the Polish parliament on his death.

Sandrino CASTEC (1960–2024)
Castec wrote a memorable page in the history of the Chile national team in 1980 with an acrobatic goal in a 2-2 draw with Argentina – his only goal in seven games for his country. A protégé of national boss Luis Ibarra, Castec played for Universidad de Chile, Audax Italiano and Cobresal, plus one year in Mexico with Cruz Azul.

Lucien KASSI-KOUADIO (1963–2024)
Kassi-Kouadio helped Ivory Coast win their first AFCON title in 1992, converting a penalty in the 11-10 shootout victory over Ghana in the final. It was the first major international final that saw every player on the pitch take a penalty.

Mahieddine KHALEF (1944–2024)
The head coach of the Algeria team that beat West Germany in the 1982 World Cup group stage, but were then controversially denied a place in the second round by the "Disgrace of Gijon" between the Germans and Austria.

John McNAMEE (1941–2024)
McNamee was such an intimidating defender for Celtic, Hibernian, Newcastle and Blackburn that even Alex Ferguson once thought twice about facing up to him after a temper-torn match. In 1969, he helped Newcastle win their last major trophy, the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup.

Emile LEJEUNE (1938–2024)
Lejeune played a then-record 276 league games for RFC Liege, who were Belgian runners-up in 1961 and Fairs Cup semi-finalists in 1964. Won ten Belgium caps.

Hugo SOTIL (1949–2024)
El Cholo made his name alongside fellow Peruvians Teofilo Cubillas and Hector Chumpitaz in the team that won the 1975 Copa America – scoring the winning goal in the final against Colombia – and reached the World Cup quarter-finals in 1970 and 1978.

At club level, Sotil partnered Johan Cruyff in helping Barcelona win their first Spanish league title in 14 years in 1974. Unfortunately for Sotil, coach Rinus Michels brought Johan Neeskens from Ajax to support Cruyff and so, in the days of two-foreigner restrictions, Sotil was surplus to requirements. He returned home in 1977, winning two domestic titles with Alianza Lima.

Aleksei BUGAYEV (1981–2024)
The defender, who played seven times for Russia including twice at Euro 2004, was killed in fighting in Ukraine. Bugayev, who starred for Torpedo and Lokomotiv Moscow, was jailed last September but was released under the system freeing prisoners prepared to join the war effort.

Dieter LINDNER (1939–2024)
The death of Lindner means that there are now only two survivors from the Eintracht Frankfurt team that lost 7-3 to Real Madrid in the historic 1960 European Cup final at Hampden Park. Lindner played only for Frankfurt, initially at inside-right, between 1956 and 1971.

Raymond MAFFIOLO (1938–2024)
Right-back Maffiolo played seven times for Switzerland in the 1960s. He spent his entire club career with Servette, winning the league title twice and being a cup final runner-up on three occasions.

Dante MIRCOLI (1947–2024)
Midfielder Mircoli, born in Rome but raised in Buenos Aires, won the Copa Libertadores and two Argentine league titles with Independiente. He also played for Estudiantes, while his dual nationality status enabled him to play for Sampdoria, Catania and Lecco during an era in which foreign players were barred.

Nikos SARGANIS (1954–2024)
Goalkeeper Sarganis played 58 times for Greece between 1980 and 1991, a decade in which he shocked the domestic game by transferring from Olympiacos to old rivals Panathinaikos. Sarganis won leagues and cups with both clubs, including in 1988 when he saved two spot-kicks and converted one himself as Panathinaikos beat Olympiacos 4-3 on penalties in the cup final after a 2-2 draw.

John DOCHERTY (1940–2024)
The Scotland-born right-winger played mostly south of the border for Brentford, Sheffield United and Reading, but he is best remembered for guiding Millwall to promotion to the top flight in 1987-88, managing a team spearheaded by Tony Cascarino and Teddy Sheringham to the old Second Division title.

Freddie STRAHAN (1938–2024)
Midfielder Strahan scored only one goal in five appearances for the Republic of Ireland but it made history: he remains the only League of Ireland player to score against England, in a 3-1 defeat in Dublin in 1964. He won both the league and FAI Cup with Shelbourne.

Words by Keir Radnedge

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"This has come as a complete shock as I have never knowingly used any banned substances or broken any rules, and am working closely with my team to investigate how this could have happened"

Chelsea winger Mykhailo Mudryk denies any wrongdoing after an "adverse finding in a routine urine test"

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Steve HOLLAND

Gareth Southgate's former assistant at England took his first managerial role since leaving Crewe Alexandra in 2008, taking charge of Japanese outfit **Yokohama F. Marinos**.

Yannick BOLASIE

After the DR Congo international's outstanding season in Brazil for Criciuma, the ex-Crystal Palace, Everton, Aston Villa and Swansea City winger joined **Cruzeiro**.

Sergio CONCEICAO

Italian giants **Milan** hired their third manager of 2024, with former Porto boss Conceicao replacing his fellow Portuguese coach Paulo Fonseca at the San Siro.

NANI

The ex-Manchester United, Sporting and **Portugal** winger announced his retirement at the age of 38, ending his playing career at hometown club Estrela da Amadora.

Hamza CHOUDHURY

The 27-year-old Leicester City midfielder, who won seven England Under-21 caps between 2018 and 2019, switched his international allegiance to **Bangladesh**.

Pep LIJNDERS

Jurgen Klopp's former assistant at Liverpool was sacked by **Red Bull Salzburg** halfway through his first season in Austria, with the club fifth in the Austrian Bundesliga.

Steffen BAUMGART

Just a month after being fired by German second-tier side Hamburg, the 53-year-old took charge of Bundesliga outfit **Union Berlin** to replace the sacked Bo Svensson.

Joao PEREIRA

Ruben Amorim's successor as head coach of **Sporting** was sacked just six weeks after being appointed. The 43-year-old Rui Borges left Vitoria Guimaraes to replace him.

Alessandro NESTA

The World Cup-winning defender was sacked as coach by **Monza** halfway through his first campaign, with the team 20th in Serie A. He was replaced by Salvatore Bocchetti.

Fabio CANNAVARO

Another legendary defender of Italy's 2006 triumph, Cannavaro's latest coaching role is with Croatian champions **Dinamo Zagreb**, whom he took charge of in December.

Eirik HORNELAND

The man who guided SK Brann from the second tier to Norwegian runners-up was hired by Ligue 1 side **Saint-Etienne**, replacing the outgoing Olivier Dall'Oglio.

Carlos CORBERAN

Valencia activated a release clause reported to be more than £3m to lure the coach from West Brom, after parting company with their former legendary midfielder Ruben Baraja.

"In 2026 it will be over. In my head it's very clear. I've done my time, with the same desire and passion to maintain France at the highest level. One has to be able to say stop"

Didier Deschamps tells French broadcaster *TF1* that he will step down as *Les Bleus* head coach after the 2026 World Cup

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

15
Years since Brazilian midfielder Oscar left first club Sao Paulo after the 33-year-old returned to his boyhood side following his exit from Chinese champions Shanghai Port.

6
Goals scored by Internazionale against Lazio in December, the capital city club's biggest-ever home defeat in Serie A.

£400m+
The reported value of the Friedkin Group's takeover of Everton after the Merseyside club was finally purchased from Farhad Moshiri.

2
Nigerians to have been named Men's African Footballer of the Year by CAF in the last two years after Ademola Lookman followed Victor Osimhen by collecting the award.

African Footballer of the Year ...Ademola Lookman

51
League points accumulated by Manchester United across the whole of 2024, the lowest calendar-year tally in the club's history in the Premier League.

9
World football titles won by Real Madrid – including three Intercontinental Cups, five Club World Cups and now the FIFA Intercontinental Cup – after they defeated Pachuca of Mexico in December *(more on page 68)*.

Italian Super Cup number eight...Milan

50
Club trophies won by Milan after they came from 2-0 down to stun city rivals Inter 3-2 in the 2024 Italian Super Cup final. Goals by Theo Hernandez, Christian Pulisic and Tammy Abraham – who hit a 93rd-minute winner – completed a remarkable comeback in Riyadh.

23
League games that Wayne Rooney took charge of Plymouth Argyle before leaving the Championship club by mutual agreement.

£12.5m
Reported fee that Tottenham paid Slavia Prague for new goalkeeper Antonin Kinsky – a record for a player from the Czech top flight.

36
League goals scored by Sporting striker Viktor Gyokeres in 2024 – no player in any top-flight division in the world managed more.

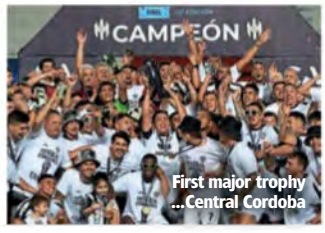
16
Teams that will compete in the NWSL in 2026 after Denver became the latest city to join the top division of women's soccer in the US. A franchise from Boston will also debut in 2026.

4
Former England managers who have been knighted after Gareth Southgate followed Alf Ramsey, Walter Winterbottom and Bobby Robson in receiving the honour.

5
English players named in FIFPro's Women's World XI: Mary Earps, Lucy Bronze, Alex Greenwood, Keira Walsh and Lauren James.

€20m
Reported fee for Seko Fofana's move from Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr to Rennes in Ligue 1, a transfer record for a player leaving the Middle East country.

1
Major trophies won by Argentine side Central Cordoba after they defeated league champions Velez Sarsfield 1-0 in the final of the 2024 Copa Argentina.



First major trophy ...Central Cordoba

3
New Premier League managers that took charge of teams in December, with Ruud van Nistelrooy, Vitor Pereira and Ivan Juric taking the reins at Leicester City, Wolverhampton Wanderers and Southampton respectively.

4
Months that football in Lebanon was suspended for due to the escalating conflict with Israel. The country's top flight returned again at the end of January after a ceasefire was announced.

705
Sevilla appearances made by Jesus Navas, more than any other player in the club's history. The right-back played his last game for the Andalusians in December before hanging up his boots.

Fond farewell ...Sevilla's Navas waves goodbye

13
French Super Cups won by Paris Saint-Germain – five more than nearest rivals Lyon – after the Parisians beat Monaco 1-0 in Doha, sealing a third Trophée des Champions title in a row.

9
Number of countries ex-Paraguay forward Lucas Barrios played his club football in – Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Germany, China, Russia, France, Brazil and Paraguay – before announcing his retirement from the game aged 40.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS

Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	6
David Raya (Arsenal)	4
Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest)	4
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	4
Caoimhin Kelleher (Liverpool)	3
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	3
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	3
David De Gea (Fiorentina)	2
Michele Di Gregorio (Juventus)	2
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	2
Franco Israel (Sporting)	2
Alex Meret (Napoli)	2
Inaki Pena (Barcelona)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino)	1
Michael Zetterer (Werder Bremen)	1

DEFENDERS

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	18
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	11
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	10
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	8
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	6
Gabriel (Arsenal)	5
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	4
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	4
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	4
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	4
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	4
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Isak Hien (Atalanta)	4
Kim Min-jae (Bayern Munich)	4
Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool)	4
William Saliba (Arsenal)	4
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	4
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	3
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Clement Lenglet (Atletico Madrid)	3
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	3
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	3
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	2
Alessandro Buongiorno (Napoli)	2
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	2
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	2
Lucas Digne (Aston Villa)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Sead Kolasinac (Atalanta)	2
Inigo Martinez (Barcelona)	2
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	2
Ola Aina (Nottingham Forest)	1
Juan Cabal (Juventus)	1
Andrea Cambiaso (Juventus)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Dodo (Fiorentina)	1
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	1
Robin Gosens (Fiorentina)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Bayern Munich)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	1
Dean Huijsen (Bournemouth)	1
Dominik Kohr (Mainz)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Nikola Milenkovic (Nottingham Forest)	1
Pedro Porro (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Nicolas Tagliafico (Lyon)	1
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	1
Pau Torres (Aston Villa)	1
Dani Vivian (Athletic Club)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	17
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	12
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	10
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	10
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	6
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	4
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	4
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	4
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	4
Pedri (Barcelona)	4
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	4
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	3
Marc Casado (Barcelona)	2
Marten de Roon (Atalanta)	2
Davide Frattesi (Internazionale)	2
Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis)	2
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	2
Adrien Rabiot (Marseille)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Angel Di Maria (Benfica)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	1
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	1
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	1
Morten Hjulmand (Sporting)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Marseille)	1
Ardon Jashari (Club Brugge)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	1
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	1
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	1
Dani Olmo (Barcelona)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	1
Malik Tillman (PSV)	1
Lucas Torreira (Galatasaray)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Piotr Zielinski (Internazionale)	1

FORWARDS

Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	21
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	19
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	15
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	10
Raphinha (Barcelona)	9
Omar Marmoush (Eintracht Frankfurt)	8
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	7
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	7
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	6
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Kerem Akturkoglu (Benfica)	3
Bradley Barcola (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	3
Mateo Retegui (Atalanta)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Samu Aghehowa (Porto)	1
Jamie Gittens (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Kai Havertz (Arsenal)	1
Joao Pedro (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	1
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Giuliano Simeone (Atletico Madrid)	1
Alexander Sorloth (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1

ESM MEMBERS:
A Bola (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

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eyewitness

Samindra Kunti reports

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudis set for 2034

It was at the moment when FIFA president Gianni Infantino addressed Saudi Arabia as: "Dear friends," that heads turned at Boulevard City, one of four public viewing parties in Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Mobile phones came out in anticipation of the 2034 host announcement. Much of the cold winter evening had passed with turgid speeches by South American officials, who spoke for almost 45 minutes – or about one-sixth of the playing time that the region will get during the 2030 World Cup co-hosted alongside Spain, Portugal and Morocco. They seemed delighted with the arrangement. Among Saudis, the excitement seemed somewhat muted.

December 11 was, however, a momentous day. It was the culmination of both the power Infantino wielded at FIFA and Saudi Arabia's growing influence in football. Once again, FIFA tilted the future of the World Cup to the Middle East; and once again, the decision was met with severe criticism.

On the big screens at Boulevard City – an entertainment park in the north of Riyadh with a replica of Times Square and expensive shops – a 13-year-old girl and boy showcased Saudi Arabia's vision of the future to the global community. In flawless English, the pair delivered a simple message: Saudi Arabia, with a young, sports-loving population, was transforming and en route to delivering the best-ever World Cup. The entire endeavour was motivated by a single goal, embodied in the bid slogan: "Growing. Together." "To us, anything is possible," declared the young girl.

While FIFA explained the bid evaluation – Saudi Arabia received the highest-ever score with 4.2 out of 5 – the local broadcast at "Times Square" was interrupted for prayer time before switching back to Zurich where Infantino was sat behind a large wooden desk, flanked by his general secretary Mattias Grafstrom. The duo delivered perhaps the most surreal congress in FIFA's long history of congresses. When the time arrived, Infantino tilted his head slightly sideways and instructed the 211 football associations, behind him on a wall of video screens, on how to collectively clap and wave through the 2030 and 2034 World Cup bids.

The clapping was bewildering, even to onlookers in Riyadh. Football fans, families, veiled women and children with bid T-shirts and green and white balloons had gathered, but it wasn't until Infantino displayed the placard bearing Saudi Arabia's name that the crowd erupted into cheers and applause, releasing balloons into the night sky. Golden ticker tape showered the crowd and the song "*Yalla Yalla*" reverberated around Riyadh.

The Saudi broadcast switched to the bid exhibition in the south of Riyadh where dignitaries and officials, including Saudi minister of sport Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal and governor of the Public Investment Fund Yasir Al Rumayyan, had convened. The political messaging was straightforward: Saudi Arabia had Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to thank for it. "More than 170 federations announced their support for us, which constitutes 80 per cent of the FIFA members," Saudi bid leader Hamad Albalawi told local media. "It is natural that any federation that visits Saudi Arabia will notice the rapid progress and support we have."

At the symbolic time of 8.34pm, fireworks above Riyadh – as well as the Saudi cities of Jeddah, Al Khobar, Abha, Neom, Al Qassim and Jubail – wrapped up a night of celebration. Tens of thousands also celebrated the announcement at Soundstorm 24, the Middle East's largest music festival, where Neymar was ▸

2034 World Cup hosts...Saudi Arabia celebrate being awarded hosting rights

on stage to greet the crowd. The Brazil forward, who plays for Al Hilal in the Saudi Pro League, said: "The young people here are really good fun. They are full of energy and just want to enjoy themselves...it's a good sign for those looking to visit in the future and the type of experience people can expect at the World Cup in Saudi Arabia in 2034."

And Neymar wasn't the only big football name to endorse the finals coming to the Arab Kingdom. Speaking after his tour of the Saudi Arabia World Cup 2034 Bid Exhibition in Riyadh, Al Nassr and Portugal legend Cristiano Ronaldo said: "The 2034 World Cup will probably be the best World Cup ever. After what I've seen today, I'm convinced that it will be amazing...the 2034 bid tagline 'Growing. Together.' is beautiful, because it's what we all have to do. We have to grow together in everything, not just in football, but in everything in life."

Back at Boulevard City, two local teenagers Aryan and Mohammed, who attended the World Cup in Qatar, were in the crowd to witness the historic moment. "We are amazing and will host the best World Cup" said Aryan "The speech by the girl is the new version of Saudi Arabia. We trust young people. We trust our leadership.

"Qatar staged a great World Cup. They defended themselves from the criticism that was started by European media. They succeeded. Even if Saudi Arabia gets criticised, we will do our best to organise an excellent version of the tournament. We are investing a lot in football and in different sectors of society We are doing great under Vision 2030. We won't stop."

Qatar 2022, the first global finals in the Middle East, had been the most controversial sporting event in modern history with an intense focus on the plight of migrant workers, whose labour helped transform the Gulf country's infrastructure. For years, the scrutiny and reporting rumbled on, shining a spotlight on the infamous *kafala* system that exploited workers on an industrial scale

Qatar and FIFA claimed that *kafala* was abolished. But on the ground, the

Celebrating...Saudi minister of sport Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal

Likely final host a rendered image of Riyadh's King Salman International Stadium

reforms largely remained paper ones. Human rights groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have warned of a repeat scenario in Saudi Arabia. They slammed the assessment of Saudi Arabia's human rights policy for the 2034 World Cup bid as "flawed". Amnesty International said: "Based on clear evidence to date, FIFA knows workers will be exploited and even die without fundamental reforms in Saudi Arabia, and yet has chosen to press ahead regardless. The organisation risks bearing a heavy responsibility for many of the human rights abuses that will follow."

FIFA's pivot to Riyadh was predictable and nullified Infantino's point that he had inherited the Qatar World Cup and its human rights problems from Sepp Blatter. Previously, Infantino had said at the Milken Conference that migrant workers: "get pride from hard work". It was a slap in the face to migrant workers who had toiled, suffered and been injured, and to the families who had lost loved ones.

A migrant worker from the Gambia, Saikou Colley, who served as a security guard during the 2022 tournament commented: "Saudi Arabia share so much in common with Qatar and it's the people behind the scenes that face hardship."

From start to finish, the Saudi coronation appeared engineered: from the trans-continental exercise of the 2030 World Cup spanning six countries, and the 2027 Women's World Cup as consolation for the South Americans for giving up their centenary dreams, to the impossible time window for other eligible nations to bid for the 2034 tournament. A World Cup bid requires extensive planning and preparation, but FIFA gave other countries less than a month to enter the race. With the Asian Football Confederation already backing Saudi Arabia, Australia were left with little chance – and thus opted not to proceed with their bid.

From start to finish, the Saudi coronation appeared engineered

Even the coronation itself was carefully stage-managed. To prevent any dissent or critical opinions, FIFA said the vote on the 2030 and 2034 tournaments would happen "en bloc" – and by acclamation.

Only Norway and Switzerland expressed dissent and had their protest registered in the congress meeting minutes. The Norwegians pointed out that: "The bidding process undermines FIFA's own 2016 reforms for good governance and transparent World Cup allocations," and that "the NFF cannot endorse a process it considers flawed and inconsistent with the principles of FIFA's own reforms."

Ahead of the 2022 World Cup, Lise Klaveness, chair of the Norwegian Football Federation, was the chief critic of Qatar's human rights record. The Norwegians ultimately did not boycott the tournament but opted for "dialogue" leading to Klaveness' famous speech in Doha. FIFA ultimately extinguished a European "rebellion" represented by the OneLove armband by threatening sporting sanctions on any team that wore it.

Two years after Qatar, that "resistance" appears to have gone somewhat mute. Most associations maintained a deafening silence. Germany and England backed the Arab Kingdom but with caveats in their statements. "We did not make the decision lightly," said the DFB. "We take the criticism of the applicant country seriously and will continue to engage in dialogue. Our goal is to work together with FIFA to improve the situation in the coming years."

The FA made its own statement: "Our focus is on ensuring that all our fans can attend and enjoy tournaments. The FA board met the Saudi Arabian Football Federation to discuss their bid in more detail. We asked them to commit to ensuring all fans would be safe and welcome in Saudi Arabia in 2034 – including LGBTQ+ fans. They assured us that they are fully committed to providing a safe and welcome environment for all fans."

Whether this "dialogue" in the intervening years can make any difference remains to be seen. Will the next decade bring respect and dignity for the migrant workers who will build Saudi Arabia's new venues and infrastructure? Or will it simply mirror their conditions in Qatar? The game can ill-afford another blood-stained World Cup.

Riyadh's Boulevard City...Saudi fans celebrate the 2034 World Cup hosting announcement

eye witness

Peterjon Cresswell reports

FRANCE

Paris' other club

Red Star FC may not have Paris Saint-Germain's glamour or Paris FC's top-flight aspirations, but it is seeped in history

It's a lively Friday night near the flea market in Paris and fans are gathering around a building site where a famous football ground used to be. Ghosts haunt the Stade Bauer – forever linked with Jules Rimet of World Cup fame – but it's not the past that has drawn a multinational crowd to the workaday neighbourhood of Saint Ouen.

Formed by Rimet in 1897, revived in recent years, regular tenants Red Star returned to this venerable landmark in 2021. While their stadium remains a quarter rebuilt, Red Star's promotion to second-tier Ligue 2 in 2024 and the club's cult status on either side of the Channel mean that the solitary East Stand is almost as packed as l'Olympic, the old-school bar just across the street.

True, the fact that most Ligue 2 games take place under the floodlights of a Friday night does encourage UK visitors to hop over to Paris for the weekend, just as a solid core of travelling support for Lens in northeastern France hails from Kent.

Ironically, the club's name is said to derive from the Red Star Line that once sailed between England and France, as a nod to Rimet's beloved English governess who always kept her passenger ticket in her purse.

The inaugural match at Stade Bauer took place in 1909 between Red Star, who had just moved in from across Paris, and the distinctly British Old Westminsters FC. Two years later, the first of several internationals staged here pitted France against England.

Fast forward a century or so, and the stickers carpeting the walls of

Stade Bauer... the Paris home of Red Star FC under renovation in 2021

Promotion party ...Red Star players celebrate last season's Championnat National title with their fans in the East Stand

the nearby Olympic bar tell a different story. Placed there by left-leaning fans of clubs such as Dulwich Hamlet and St Pauli, they indicate the allegiance between these groups, who follow each other's teams knowing that they will be fraternising with like-minded people before, during and after the game. This also explains why any first-time visitor to Red Star should not be surprised to hear many English voices when making the short walk from Porte de Clignancourt metro station, through the flea market of Saint Ouen, to the bleak streets surrounding the stadium.

This sense of urban expression isn't confined to the East Stand or nearest bar. In the boardroom, forward-thinking club president and film producer Patrice Haddad, who took over the club after its near disappearance in the early 2000s, has been backing a ground-breaking project known as Red Star Lab.

This involves a series of workshops for the club's youngsters to learn new skills – street art, dance, design – with fashion at the forefront. For much of the last decade, his right-hand man has been someone familiar to fans of West Ham United and Manchester United: David Bellion.

Raised in the suburbs of Paris, albeit in the more salubrious surroundings of Sevres, the former striker spent five years in England before seeing out his playing career at Red Star. Having bowed out in 2016, street-savvy Bellion sat down with Haddad to carve out his role as creative director, exporting the Red Star brand, partly by way of cultural exchanges at grassroots level.

In October 2024, for example, the kids of Red Star Lab travelled to Berlin to create the latest in a series of film clips showing them mixing with locals in communal games of street sport and visiting the Olympiastadion. The five-pointed motif is worn with pride throughout, by youngsters invariably susceptible to other temptations amid the social housing of the Paris suburbs.

Another Red Star old boy with experience in London, ex-Fulham forward Steve Marlet, is Haddad's presidential advisor, overseeing the progress being made through the ranks and reporting back.

So far, however, little of this input has translated into top-level success on the pitch. When Bellion slotted away one of Red Star's four goals against Istres back in May 2015, it sealed the third-tier National 1 title ahead of city rivals Paris FC.

Promoted to Ligue 2 for the first time this century, the club then became embroiled in interminable negotiations with the municipality that owned the Stade Bauer over its much-needed rebuild. The impasse led to Red Star having to move out to play in Beauvais, the site of a budget airport 75km from Paris. The team duly slipped back down to the third tier.

During the five-season struggle to climb back up, Nantes-based property developers Groupe Realites bought the stadium from Saint-Ouen-sur-Seine council but, as yet, only one stand is fully functional.

Red Star supporters, meanwhile, shuffle around fenced-off areas to access the East Stand along a muddy pathway. Visiting supporters are allocated half of the basic, diminutive South Stand.

Paris is an anomaly. While suburban environments such as these have been one of the most fertile breeding grounds in Europe for footballing talent – think Kylian Mbappe, Paul Pogba and Riyad Mahrez – the French capital has been

Seeped in history...a general view of Red Star's Stade Bauer

Club president... Patrice Haddad

represented by only one top-flight club since 1990.

For a short while back then, the now dominant Paris Saint-Germain had been joined in the old Division 1 by Racing Club, another gilded name from the pre-war era. Around this same time, Red Star were mainly playing in Division 2, having last experienced top-tier football in 1975.

The decline of these two great clubs, Racing and Red Star, who between them captured ten French Cups between 1921 and 1949, left a vacuum that hasn't really been filled since. Given the global phenomenon of PSG, who carry the Paris brand to their stores in Tokyo, London and New York, not to mention Doha, foreign investors have only recently twigged that the City of Light might be the gateway to a huge untapped market.

The Stade Bauer stands surrounded by cranes while 777 Partners try to work out how to recoup their investment

In 2022, Miami-based 777 Partners added Red Star to its roster of clubs – stretching from Vasco da Gama in Rio de Janeiro to Melbourne Victory in Australia's A-League – while in October 2024, Red Bull teamed up with French retail billionaire Bernard Arnault to buy a majority stake in Paris FC.

Also displaying the Eiffel Tower on their badge, Ligue 2 promotion hopefuls Paris FC have been knocking on the door of Ligue 1 since 2018. But even with free admission to every game, the prospect of top-flight football has failed to fill the Stade Charlety, a functional, multi-sports bowl first opened in 1939.

The Stade Bauer, meanwhile, stands surrounded by cranes while 777 Partners try to work out how to recoup their investment even after the stadium is fully operational. A cheerfully animated East Stand adds up to barely 5,000 spectators. Even if other stands were to open, attendances wouldn't rise into five figures. The grey Saint Ouen, located just the other side of the Peripherique, the ring road that represents a psychological barrier to Parisians, may be a football romantic's dream but it's a hard sell to the public at large. In addition, Paris is not London, with its seven top-flight clubs.

The reason for this disconnect on this side of the Channel, since 1990 at least, has not only been socio-economic or the fickle pastime habits of Parisians, but also practical. Just as Racing Club de France's illustrious home of Colombes, where the 1938 World Cup final took place, was unfit for purpose by the new era of TV riches, so the Stade Bauer was nearly swept away by a powerful storm back in 1999.

By then, no-frills terraces were a thing of the past in England. Not so in Paris, where the pampered populace seeks a certain level of comfort and service.

Both stadiums played a prominent role in hosting the Olympic football tournament, the de facto World Cup, in 1924. The great Uruguay side won their first gold medal at Colombes, while the renowned Hungary team of the 1920s, featuring later managerial legend Bela Guttmann, suffered a shock defeat by Egypt at the Stade Bauer. Though many hoped that the 2024 Games would help provide the impetus for the centennial rebirth of both venues, in the end only Colombes staged matches – hockey matches.

Red Star's smaller ground had originally been renovated for 1924. Called the Stade de Paris, it was renamed after French Resistance hero Jean-Claude Bauer, a doctor who had moved into this working-class area specifically to help those most in need. He was executed by the Nazis at the same Mont-Valerien fortress near Colombes as Red Star winger Rino Della Negra, a fellow victim and Resistance fighter.

Today, the East Stand carries his name, also emblazoned across the custom-made T-shirts sold by Red Star ultras behind it, alongside the makeshift outlet proffering the club's official merchandise.

This was probably not how Patrice Haddad envisioned the Bauer Corner, an upscale boutique and events venue within the redeveloped stadium, complementing the Bauer Box of office units. Until that day comes, an amiable band of followers will be making their Friday-night pilgrimage – and local young influencers will be spreading the Red Star message way beyond Saint Ouen.

"Work the body, awaken the mind"...a quote by club founder Jules Rimet at Red Star's ground

eye witness

Lukas Vrablik reports

DENMARK

Working smarter, not harder: the rise of FC Midtjylland

Midtjylland sporting director...Kristian Bach Bak *Credit: FC Midtjylland*

Throughout its brief history, FC Midtjylland has been a football club built on innovation. It has had to be. Only formed in 1999 after the merger of two other teams, the Danish club has had to be smart in order to compete with the country's traditional giants. In 2014–15, they were rewarded with their first-ever Superliga title – and never looked back.

Their revolutionary outlook on football, with an essential use of data analysis, was their key to success. Since then, Midtjylland have won three more Danish titles, including last season, as well as two Danish Cups, and they regularly compete in European football.

The hunger for more is still very much there, with the team's new owners aiming to become one of the top 50 clubs in Europe. That's an ambitious plan for a club from Herning, a small town of around 50,000, but Midtjylland have consistently punched above their weight and are ready to continue.

"The superior thing in our club is our DNA and culture, the way we behave with each other," sporting director Kristian Bach Bak tells *World Soccer*. "It doesn't matter if we are in the dressing room, among coaching staff or in the directors' box. It's about DNA and culture and that's why we are a big club."

Bak knows the club inside out. The former defender played for Midtjylland across two spells, first from 2000 to 2007 and again from 2010 to 2016. After retiring, he became the assistant manager before graduating to his current role in 2022. Now, he is one of the main men in forming Midtjylland's strategy.

Bak remembers when Matthew Benham, the owner of Brentford, bought the club in July 2014. Sophisticated data analysis quickly became a key part of the strategy, and in the first season under the Englishman's leadership Midtjylland were crowned champions.

"At the start, everybody laughed about us. 'What can you use stats for?' they said. And actually, we weren't using them that well in the beginning. It took us three or four years," recalls Bak. "You can have all the stats, but if you don't know how to use them, then it doesn't matter."

European aspirations ...Midtjylland in action in this season's UEFA Champions League play-offs

Serial winners... Midtjylland celebrate with the second of their four Danish Superliga titles back in 2017-18

Benham made his fortune in the betting industry, and places great stock in the value of data. But, at both Brentford and Midtjylland, that was only part of the strategy.

"You can't forget about the most important thing in football: the team and the feeling in the dressing room," says Bak. "That's even more important than numbers. You can have the best stats but you still need a good dressing room and team feeling."

For the players in the dressing room, data analysis meant a major change. "As a player, it was hard in the beginning, because football is also about feelings and adrenaline. In 90 minutes, you give everything and afterwards you have a feeling:

it was good or it was bad. Mostly it was good when you win. But the stats gave us another picture of the game.

"After every game we could see, together with the coaches, if it was a good game or a bad game in the way we wanted to play. For example, we could see how many times we could have got a ball in the opponent's half. As a player, you would never think like that. It actually helped us in bad periods of the season. You could look at the stats and see they are pretty good, so we are doing okay. So we could say we didn't play badly, we were just unlucky. Or the opposite, we would win games but we looked at the stats and we realised we should do a lot more. As a club, we still had something to look at, even if the results were good."

Data analysis was at the basis of everything – from tactical plans to set-piece routines to transfer strategy. Coaches could check data at half-time and adapt the game plan accordingly. Initially laughed at for their approach, Midtjylland have won the Danish title four times in the past ten years. They have also managed to put themselves on the European football map, reaching the Champions League group stage in 2020-2021 where they faced Liverpool, Ajax and Atalanta.

Landmark sale... academy graduate Simon Kjaer departed Midtjylland in 2008

Yet Midtjylland's reputation for innovation predates Benham's arrival. In 2004, they opened the country's first club youth academy and developed several internationals, including Simon Kjaer. Denmark's captain at the last World Cup, the defender was sold in 2008 to Palermo as one of the club's first major sales. He was quickly followed by the likes of Winston Reid (sold to West Ham) Pione Sisto (Celta Vigo), Rasmus Kristensen (Ajax) and Andreas Poulsen (Borussia Monchengladbach).

But what made Midtjylland's youth development so effective?

"The number one rule is that we are a family club," explains Bak. "Every time a new player joins our academy, we make him feel at home. If there are any issues outside the pitch, we'll help him. If he needs an extra family, we'll give him one. We believe that if our players feel safe and well outside the pitch, we can develop them.

"Then, when they are in training, we have coaches with very high demands."

Some of those coaches have worked for the club since 2004, so they are used to the club's culture and offer necessary continuity from the academy through to the first team. Midtjylland's youth understand what they have to do when they make the step up to the first team.

"And then we have our style of play.

New signings...young Senegalese defender Ousmane Diao and Poland striker Adam Buksa celebrate a goal

We like to be very aggressive, think forward, pressing football, and finish the games with individual quality. We don't have to play 500 passes like Barcelona, but we want to play aggressive and go with high pressure in the opponent's half and play up there.

At the heart of Midtjylland's philosophy is an attempt to outsmart bigger and richer clubs.

"We have to beat the clubs who have much more economical strength and are in bigger leagues. In order to do that, we have to do something differently, to think differently, train differently. We have to be closer to our players and develop them better."

Recent years have seen major changes at the club. In the summer of 2023, Benham sold his majority share to Heartland, owned by Anders Holch Povlsen, Denmark's richest man. Yet Bak says that the billionaire's arrival hasn't changed Midtjylland's ambition.

"Of course, it has given us some extra muscles economically. We could buy some players on a higher level and still keep our strategy to play with our young players, and of course sell them again after two or three years at the club and playing in Europe. But maybe the new ownership gave us a chance to buy players at an even higher level. Every club needs to play in Europe and make good transfers. The new ownership also gave us brand new training facilities, with a new academy where we can have youth players with the first team together. It gave us bigger opportunities."

Takeover...the press conference announcing Midtjylland's takeover by Heartland in 2023

> "We have to beat the clubs who have much more economical strength and are in bigger leagues. In order to do that, we have to do something differently, to think differently, train differently"
>
> **Midtjylland sporting director Kristian Bach Bak**

In the summer transfer window, Midtjylland spent €15 million, while bringing in just under €6m in player sales. In contrast, during Benham's last two seasons at the helm, the club made transfer profits in excess of €20m.

But rather than signifying the start of a new big-spending approach, Bak believes that this will be a one-off: "We have used more money this year than we are going to use in the next years," he explains. "We made some bigger transfers in because we want to make the team better, [but] in the upcoming years we are not going to buy so many.

"We plan to introduce some academy players into our first team. Our ownership also bought a club in Portugal [second-tier side CD Mafra], so we are going to bring some players from there."

One player, the talented 20-year-old Senegalese defender Ousmane Diao, has already arrived from Mafra. He accounted for €3m of that summer spending, alongside Poland striker Adam Buksa from Lens, Ecuadorian midfielder Denil Castillo from Shakhtar Donetsk (both for €4m) and Czech Republic target-man Jan Kuchta from Sparta Prague. They were joined by arguably the most high-profile arrival, Switzerland international Kevin Mbabu.

Selling players for a profit, including in the future youngsters like Diao and Castillo, will very much remain a part of the Midtjylland approach, and with that in mind they have invested significantly in improving the training facilities to aid players' development. But Midtjylland want to be successful on the pitch, too – both domestically and in Europe.

"We want to be a top-50 club in Europe; right now we are maybe around the 75th place," admits Bak. "We always want to have a place in Europe – to play Europa League or even Champions League every year, while still fighting for the Danish title. That's our ambition."

This season, they failed in the Champions League play-off against Slovan Bratislava, securing at least a spot in the Europa League. "We are very close to where we want to be. That's the ambition every year," Bak concludes.

European contenders ...Midtjylland are competing in this season's Europa League

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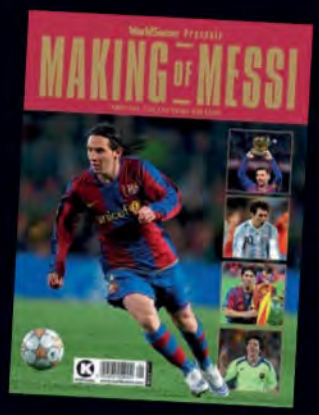

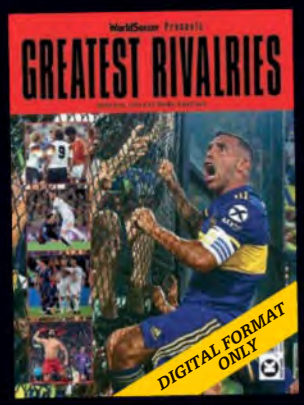

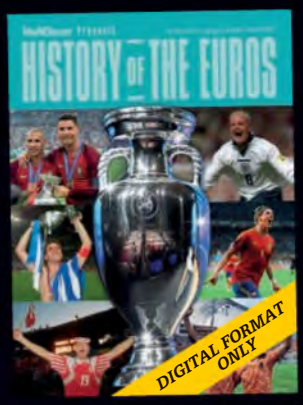

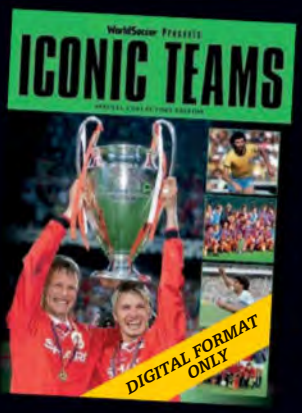

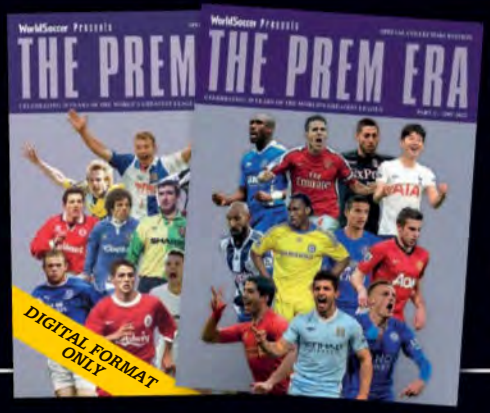

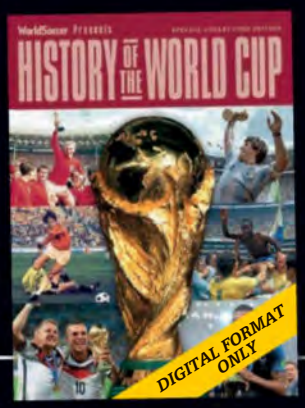

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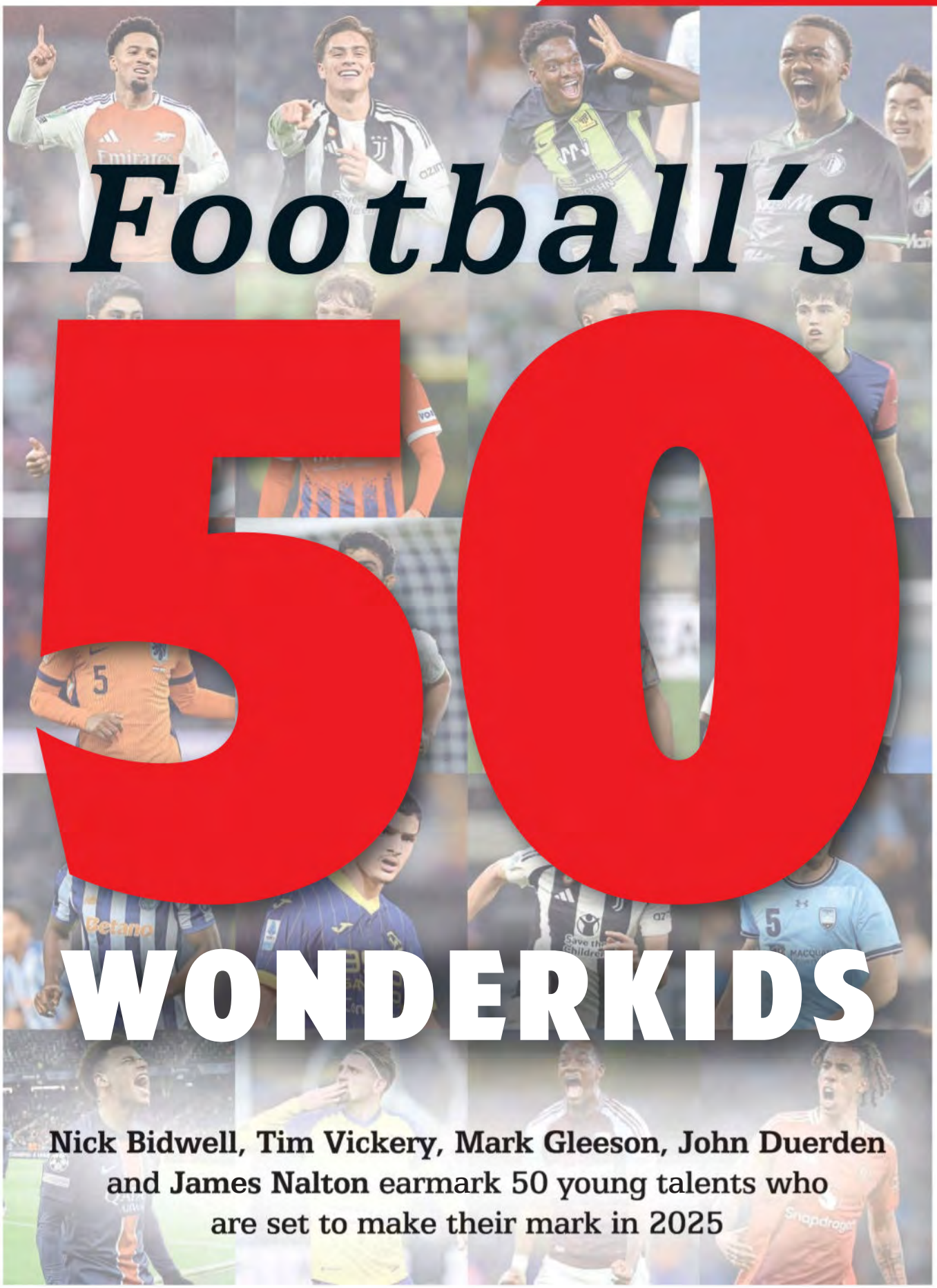


Football's 50 WONDERKIDS

Nick Bidwell, Tim Vickery, Mark Gleeson, John Duerden and James Nalton earmark 50 young talents who are set to make their mark in 2025

Samu AGHEHOWA

Club: Porto (Por)
Age: 20
Position: Forward

Pay no attention to his recent decision to reconfigure his sporting identity, ditching the surname "Omorodion" for Aghehowa in honour of his beloved mother. All that matters to the Porto faithful is that he continues to maintain his stupendous goalscoring record for the Dragons since pitching up in the summer from Atletico Madrid.

Any club with pretensions of grandeur needs a prolific marksman and the talented 20-year-old Spanish international – born in Spain's North African enclave of Melilla to Nigerian refugee parents – has proved just that, racking up a goal a game in his first ten league starts and netting five more in the Europa League. What's more, he's the complete line-leading package: hard-working, oozing pace and raw-boned force, aerially powerful, clever in his movement both within and outside the box and perfectly comfortable in build-up play.

Porto coach Vitor Bruno cannot believe his luck: "There's an imposing quality about him. In the way he attacks, in the way he positions himself, in the way he keeps the ball and in the way he combines with his team-mates."

Sergio Fernandez, the director of sport at Spanish top-flight side Alaves, where Aghehowa starred on loan last season, is equally fulsome in his praise: "Samu has a great understanding of attacking spaces and his speed allows him to win almost every duel. If he develops as he should, he will become one of the best forwards in European football."

To describe the deal that sent him from Atletico to Porto as a complicated one would be an understatement. Porto, who now have him under contract until 2029, coughed up €15 million for 50 per cent of the player's rights and will have the option to purchase a further 15 per cent of those rights in each of the next two years.

For the moment, Atletico retain 50 per cent ownership of Aghehowa and should he be sold on by Porto, the Spanish club could bank as much as half of the fee. That percentage will decrease if Porto purchase more of his rights, but Atleti still could make a substantial profit on the €6m they paid Granada for him in August 2023.

Aghehowa, a gold medallist with Spain at the Paris Olympics, made his full debut for *La Roja* last November in a Nations League win over Switzerland, replacing Alvaro Morata for the second half of the 3-2 victory. Some observers believe that he is the Spanish captain's natural successor as the line-leader. Now it's time for him to prove it.

Jerry AFRIYIE

Club: Thoughts FC (Gha)
Age: 20
Position: Striker

Heads were turned when the striker was called up by the Black Stars in November, given that he currently plays in Ghana's third tier, but he proved his worth by scoring against Niger on his debut. Scouts will be watching him at the U20 AFCON in the spring, having fired Ghana to the finals in Ivory Coast as the top scorer and best player in qualifying.

Arif AIMAN

Club: Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas)
Age: 22
Position: Winger

The winger has been impressing domestically and in Asia for Johor Darul Ta'zim and is now an established Malaysia international. The country is desperate to see one of its talents succeed in Europe and the 22-year-old, linked to Rangers, could be the one.

Samuel AMADI

Club: Smouha (Egy)
Age: 21
Position: Winger

The Nigeria Under-23 international left his home country in 2022, joining Ceramica Cleopatra from Akwa United. This season Amadi is on loan at another Egyptian side, Smouha, but that is likely to only be a springboard on his way to a club in Europe.

Keny ARROYO

Club: Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
Age: 18
Position: Winger
The Independiente del Valle production line, which can claim at least half Ecuador's current starting XI, continues to churn out top talent. The latest sensation is a lithe left-footed right-winger who made such an impression, with eight assists in the 2024 league, that he was fast tracked into the senior Ecuador squad.

Reda BELAHYANE

Club: Verona (Ita)
Age: 20
Position: Defensive midfielder
One of the most coveted youngsters on the Italian top-flight scene, the Morocco defensive midfielder combines superior constructive qualities with discipline and wholehearted commitment in the pressing and tackling departments.

Adriano BERTACCINI

Club: Sint-Truiden (Bel)
Age: 24
Position: Forward
Archetypal penalty-box poacher, who was born and raised in Belgium and has represented them at youth level. Now insists his primary aim is to play senior football for Italy, honouring his parents from Puglia and his footballing role model, Pippo Inzaghi.

Eliesse BEN SEGHIR

Club: Monaco (Fra)
Age: 19
Position: Winger
Just over two years after becoming the first African nation to reach the semi-finals of a World Cup, Morocco should have no worries about falling off their perch. Indeed, they already have a wonderful new generation of attacking talent champing at the bit, a group featuring Hamza Igamane of Rangers, Villarreal's Ilias Akhomach and last but not least Ben Seghir, an instinctive marvel of a youngster who sells incendiary ball skills by the yard.

Good enough to shine for France at several fledgling age groups (Under-16s through to Under-19s) – with the highlight being his Player of the Tournament prize at the famous Toulon festival in 2023 – the youngster took many by surprise last year with his decision to switch allegiance to Morocco, the country of his parents.

"I made this choice because of my roots," he explained. "You could say it's an audacious call at my age, but why wait when I know what I want."

The change of flag has worked out well for him thus far, winning a bronze medal with the Atlas Lions at the Paris Olympics and looking the part in his eight senior appearances in World Cup and Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers after making his debut in a friendly against Angola in March.

How fitting that the 19-year-old Morocco international was born in Saint-Tropez, the Cote d'Azur HQ global jet-set. When firing on all cylinders, he is a one-man show of dexterity, imagination, vision and memorable goals, the livewire game-changer capable of weaving spells in any number of positions: as an attacking midfielder, wide on the left or in false-nine mode.

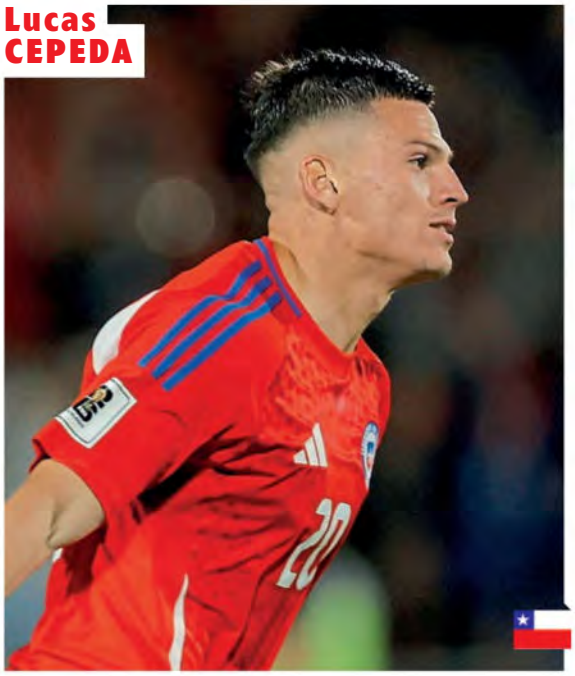
By Christmas he was Monaco's most dangerous attacker of the current Ligue 1 season, contributing five goals and three assists. No teenager in Europe's top five leagues had scored more in the current campaign.

Few African internationals in Europe are as naturally gifted as him, though he is far from the finished professional product. Consistency is a problem, as is a tendency to be somewhat wasteful in front of goal and a nonchalant attitude to defensive duties. Monaco coach Adi Hutter also wants him to sharpen up his on-the-ball decision-making.

"His dribbling ability is incredible, but when we're up against a mid-block, that can be dangerous for us," Hutter declared recently. "Eliesse knows it. He must learn when to dribble, when to play a one-two and when to pass to a team-mate in a better position."

So much to learn, so much to offer.

Lucas CEPEDA



Club: Colo-Colo (Chi)
Age: 22
Position: Winger
After two years in the Chilean second division with Santiago Wanderers, Cepeda stepped up to the top flight in 2024 and, after taking a little while to find his feet, eventually proved decisive for the 2024 champions. A left-footed winger comfortable on either flank, his brace against Venezuela in November has given hope that Chile at last have unearthed a top talent.

Tyler DIBLING

Club: Southampton (Eng)
Age: 18
Position: Attacking midfielder
The Exeter-born starlet, who turns 19 in February, has proved the one ray of light in a season of mediocrity for the Saints. As fearless as he is provocatively skilful and mature physically, he won his first cap for the England Under-21s in November.

Amara DIOUF

Club: Generation Foot (Sen)
Age: 16
Position: Winger
Senegal's youngest-ever international when capped at just 15 in mid-2023. That came shortly after top scoring at the U17 AFCON finals, and he ended the year by impressing at the U17 World Cup. Turns 17 in June and is likely to join a big European club.

Desire DOUE

Club: Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age: 19
Position: Winger
PSG have been very careful not to overuse the pacy wing wizard since paying Rennes €50 million for him in the summer, but now seem ready to unleash him. Outstanding in end-of-year wins in the Champions League at Red Bull Salzburg and in Ligue 1 against Lyon and Monaco.

Jhon DURAN

Club: Aston Villa (Eng)
Age: 21
Position: Striker
After being confined to the brief of goal-hungry supersub, Duran's sheer weight of goals finally forced Villa manager Unai Emery to hand him a regular starting berth. In his first 50 games for the club, Duran has only started a handful, despite regularly impressing – especially in the Villans' famous Champions League win over Bayern Munich.

Omar EL SAAIY

Club: Al Ahly (Egy)
Age: 22
Position: Midfielder
Given the experience and quality in the squad at African champions Al Ahly, it is near impossible for a young player to break through, but the 22-year-old midfielder has seen action in both the Champions League and Intercontinental Cup in Qatar.

Pau CUBARSI

Club: Barcelona (Spa)
Age: 17
Position: Centre-back
Yet another jewel to emerge from Barca's renowned *La Masia* academy, Cubarsi is one tough customer. Left battered and bloodied after being accidentally kicked in the face by a Red Star Belgrade opponent during a Champions League tie in November, the teenager, whose gruesome injuries needed ten stitches to repair the damage, initially looked unlikely to feature for the *Blaugrana* in their next fixture, a La Liga encounter five days later at Real Sociedad. The first reaction of the Barca management was not to risk him, but so eager was the youngster to play that a special protective mask was commissioned, thus enabling him to continue his ever-present record in the first team this term.

Masked or unmasked, Cubarsi is one of those no-nonsense warriors who just gets on with the job with minimum ego and maximum love of his club. Despite his tender years, nothing ever seems to faze him. The bigger the challenge, the more he relishes it – as he proved in Barca's 4-0 thumping of Real Madrid at the Bernabeu in October, masterfully shutting out both Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Junior.

Cubarsi, who broke into the Barca first team midway through last season and now seems absolutely undroppable, is the kid who makes the adult world look like child's play. In defensive mode, he is fast, resolute, brave and gritty with an inner radar for danger, very much in his element when springing an offside trap. Early on this term, many thought that the high defensive line set up by new Barcelona coach Hansi Flick was tantamount to playing with fire. But Cubarsi and his three defensive team-mates have made it work magnificently, extremely well co-ordinated and knowing exactly when to step up.

With Barca since the age of 11, the Catalan native from the Girona region has a subtle side as well, thoroughly at ease in the role of manoeuvre instigator, comfortable in possession and in progressing the team's play with shrewd line-breaking passes.

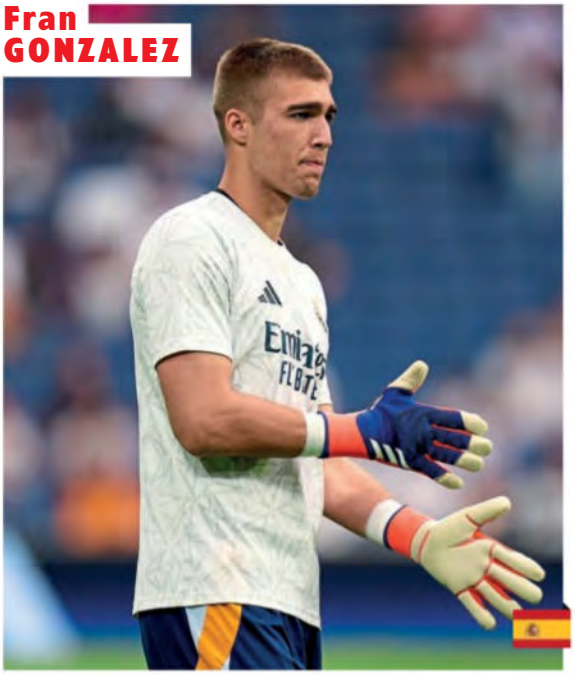
It has been a rewarding time for Cubarsi on the international front too, earning his first senior cap for Spain as a late sub in a friendly against Colombia in March 2024 and striking gold with his country's Under-23 side at the Paris Olympics just a few months later.

He says he models himself on former Barca defensive strongman Carles Puyol. It shows.

Reza GHANDIPOUR

Club: Malavan (Irn)
Age: 19
Position: Winger
Just turned 19, the exciting winger has expressed his desire to head to Europe whenever possible and, judging from his quality performances in the Iranian league, that step up won't be a problem for him. Has starred for Iran's Under-17 side, scoring 11 goals in 14 appearances including one at the 2023 U17 World Cup in Indonesia.

Fran GONZALEZ



Club: Real Madrid (Spa)
Age: 19
Position: Goalkeeper
Insiders at the Bernabeu confidently assert that their towering reserve keeper will one day fill Thibaut Courtois' big gloves. A European champion with Spain's U19s last year, Gonzalez has made great progress since arriving from Cultural Leonesa in 2022. Still waiting for his senior debut, he is a regular in the third tier for Real's second team, Castilla.

Arda GULER

Club: Real Madrid (Spa)
Age: 19
Position: Attacking midfielder
Brilliant winger or attacking midfielder blessed with the most sublime technical ability. In his second season with *Los Blancos*, a bit-part agenda may well see him move on, potentially on loan in January. He is sure to have a long list of suitors, not least some Premier League clubs.

Talal HAJI

Club: Al Ittihad (KSA)
Age: 17
Position: Forward
The pacy and powerful forward was given his club debut by Nuno Espirito Santo and his international debut by Roberto Mancini at 16. The Al Ittihad star, the youngest goalscorer in the Saudi league, is seen as the country's great hope for the future – particularly the 2034 World Cup.

Lewis HALL

Club: Newcastle United (Eng)
Age: 20
Position: Left-back
Swashbuckling left-back who came off the bench in November to make his England debut in a Nations League victory over Greece. The Chelsea academy graduate, who headed to the northeast in a £35m deal in 2023, is comfortable and enterprising on the ball.

ESTEVAO

Club: Palmeiras (Bra)
Age: 17
Position: Winger
Penultimate round of the Brazilian league, and Palmeiras have to win away to Cruzeiro to keep their championship hopes alive. Near the end, at 1-1, Estevao wins a free-kick on the edge of the area. It is a high-pressure moment. He steps up, curls a magisterial shot past veteran goalkeeper Cassio and into the net – and no one is the least bit surprised. It was almost expected. This is an illustration of just how high the bar of expectation has been set by a player who only started his first professional game in the middle of April, when he was still a 16-year-old.

Bound for Chelsea after the Club World Cup, Estevao is the most dazzling talent Brazil has produced since Neymar – and he seems to come with less baggage. Palmeiras coach Abel Ferreira oversaw the development of Endrick – the striker now with Real Madrid who decided last year's league title in favour of Palmeiras and who famously scored last March away to England and Spain – but he puts Estevao in a different bracket. When the latest wonderkid exploded onto the scene in April and May, Ferreira was fighting not to go overboard with praise – but in the end, he could not help himself. Estevao, he exclaimed, is: "different from anything I've ever seen."

In part, this is a tribute to the player's mentality. Coach Ferreira uses Estevao as an example to the club's other youth products for his persistence, for the way that his head does not drop when things do not go his way.

This enhances a skillset so impressive that he can appear to be operating at a different speed from his opponents, with balance and technique that give him time to assess options while those around him are struggling to keep up.

A slightly built left-footer who usually features on the right wing, Estevao can dribble at pace and with quick changes of direction. He likes to cut in and unleash a whippy shot with surprising power. But he can also go on the outside and calmly pick his spot for a cross or a pull back with his right foot, and this makes him very difficult to mark.

He has an eye for goal – his first start, against Liverpool of Uruguay in the Copa Libertadores, was celebrated with a far-post header that would never have been expected from a player of his build.

Competition is fierce for places on the wing in the Brazil side, but Estevao has already made four appearances off the bench in World Cup qualification. 2024, then, was a triumphant year, when from nowhere Estevao established himself as not just promise but reality. One of the very best players in the Brazilian league – next stop, the world.

Jamie GITTENS

Club: Borussia Dortmund (Ger)
Age: 20
Position: Winger

No doubt about it. Borussia Dortmund's main source of attacking intent this season is located on their left flank, the domain and happy hunting ground of the irrepressible young Englishman Gittens.

While Dortmund are anything but a highly-tuned collective unit under new coach Nuri Sahin, they often make up for that absence of substance with the individual brilliance of Gittens, who truly has come into his own this term with his turbo-charged bursts, one-on-one virtuosity and spectacular goals.

The two goals he fired venomously home against Bayern and Gladbach on consecutive rounds of the Bundesliga autumn championship were simply the stuff of dreams. The strike that gave Dortmund the lead in their 1-1 draw with Bayern at the Westfalenstadion simply had all the pulse-raising elements: the cute dummy he sold to an over-committed Konrad Laimer wide on the halfway line, a 50-metre goal-bound dash with the ball at his feet and finally the powerful left-footed finish high into Manuel Neuer's net.

A week later, against Borussia Monchengladbach, he had even more tricks up his sleeve, adroitly outfoxing a couple of hapless defenders as he cut inside to lash in a right-footed screamer into the far top corner. Simply unstoppable.

Since quitting the Manchester City academy for Dortmund in September 2020, Gittens has had to be patient. COVID restrictions threw a spanner in the works in his early days in the Ruhr and he missed the best part of two seasons with serious injuries: torn ankle ligaments in 2021-22 and shoulder issues in the following campaign. Last season, he fared much better physically and also in terms of his playing contribution – two goals and eight assists in all competitions – albeit mainly used from the bench.

The difference this season is that the doors that were once closed to him are now unlocked, pushed open by the departure to MLS of creative ace Marco Reus and Karim Adeyemi's long period on the sidelines with a thigh problem. Opportunity knocked and how well he has responded.

His new-found place in the firmament of German football is not the only wind of change gusting around him. Taking the advice of his father, Jamie no longer plays under the name of "Bynoe-Gittens", eschewing the double-barrel denomination for the simpler version. Straight to the point – exactly like his dynamic style.

Jorrel HATO

Club: Ajax (Ned)
Age: 18
Position: Defender

With a host of big European clubs showing interest in this highly-promising defender, comfortable in the centre or on the left of the back-line, Ajax wisely extended his contract late last season, persuading him to sign a new five-year deal. Not yet 19 and already has five senior Dutch caps to his name.

Michael KAYODE

Club: Fiorentina (Ita)
Age: 20
Position: Right-back

Recently named Italy's best talent at the 2024 Golden Boy awards, the Under-21 international finds himself in a paradoxical situation: short of game time with Fiorentina, playing just 33 Serie A minutes before Christmas, yet with a high number of Premier League clubs reportedly interested.

Franco MASTANTUONO

Club: River Plate (Arg)
Age: 17
Position: Attacking midfielder

Intelligent playmaker whose game is based less on speed than on mature poise and a wonderful left foot, which carries a threat from free-kicks. Has been used most often wide on the right, but it is easy to imagine him moving into a more central role.

Geovany QUENDA

Club: Sporting (Por)
Age: 17
Position: Winger

If you want to know more about the explosive 17-year-old right-winger or right wing-back, who, in the space of just a few weeks, went from domestic league debutant to full national team squad member, then a 38-second social media clip is really all you need to see. The video in question is from Portugal Under-17s' stunning 6-0 victory over Morocco in a youth tournament back in 2023, when the outstanding youngster demonstrated his status as NextGen phenomenon with a stunning solo goal.

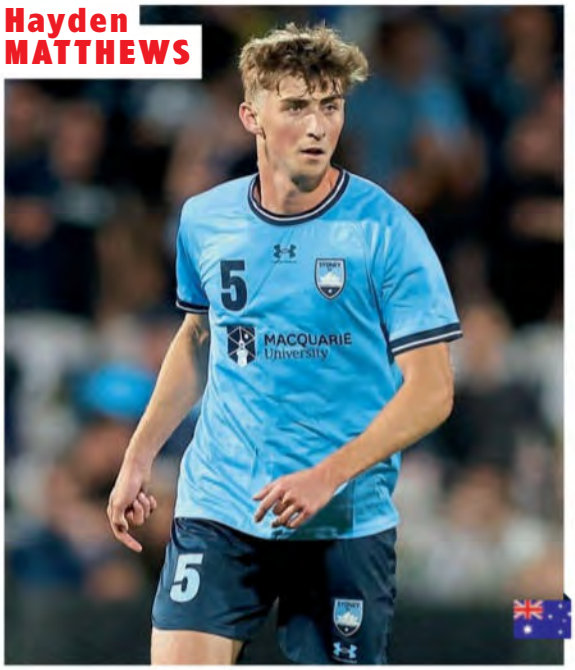
Even Maradona, Messi or a young Cristiano Ronaldo would have been proud of Quenda's prodigious dribbling exercise that afternoon, intercepting a loose pass in his own half and then making goal-bound tracks, one by one leaving six defenders in his wake before calmly slotting the ball home from close quarters. A quite astonishing exhibition of ball control, pace and balance.

Quenda, a product of Sporting's ever-productive academy system, is very much enjoying the ultimate in breakout seasons, the impressive tone set by the goal he scored on his first-team debut for the club in the 4-3 defeat to Porto in the Portuguese Super Cup in August. Now in the record books as the Lions' youngest-ever goalscorer (17 years and 95 days), he continued to shine in the first three Primeira League games of the 2024-25 campaign and, in a sensational twist, was called up to the senior *Selecao* squad for September's UEFA Nations League fixtures against Croatia and Scotland.

He did not get on the pitch during those ties and it was the same "watch and learn" brief when he was included in Roberto Martinez's squad for a trip to Croatia in November. However his time surely will come. With his powers of acceleration, quick feet and agility, Quenda looks every inch a top-level wide-man. In the shape of Francisco Trincao, Pedro Neto and Francisco Conceicao, Portugal already have a strong complement of right-wingers. But Quenda could turn out to be the best of the bunch.

Born in the West African country of Guinea-Bissau, Quenda is rumoured to be on the watch-list of a string of top clubs. Manchester United, where he would link up with his old Sporting boss Ruben Amorim, are thought to be one of the most interested parties, but they will face strong competition for his signature from the likes of Manchester City, Liverpool, Paris Saint-Germain and RB Leipzig.

Hayden MATTHEWS



Club: Sydney FC (Aus)
Age: 20
Position: Centre-back

Signed his first professional contract in 2024 and then made his international debut in the same year for the Socceroos. Sydney have been fending off interest from England – namely from Championship side Portsmouth – but it merely looks to be a matter of time for the 6ft 5in centre-back.

Yaimar MEDINA

Club: Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
Age: 20
Position: Left-back

Was a splendid impact sub in South America's U23 tournament, with his dazzling runs from left wing and his even more dazzling free-kicks. Since then has consolidated his career at club level, either as an attacking left-back or further forward. Capped at senior level.

Antoni MILAMBO

Club: Feyenoord (Ned)
Age: 19
Position: Attacking midfielder

Feyenoord's youngest-ever debutant when he broke into the first team in 2021 at just 16 years and 131 days – beating Georginio Wijnaldum's previous record – Milambo has been flying of late, especially impressive with a string of goals in the Champions League.

Relebohile MOFOKENG

Club: Orlando Pirates (RSA)
Age: 20
Position: Winger
The left-sided attacker made his debut for South Africa in June's World Cup qualifying victory over Zimbabwe, only a week after scoring a stunning individual stoppage-time goal to win the cup final for Orlando Pirates over runaway league champions Mamelodi Sundowns.

Cristhian MOSQUERA

Club: Valencia (Spa)
Age: 20
Position: Centre-back
The biggest compliment one can pay the Spain Under-21 international centre-back – another of the Paris Olympics gold medallists – is that there appears to be no ceiling to his development. Rock solid in everything he does and an excellent leader and back-line organiser to boot.

Ethan NWANERI

Club: Arsenal (Eng)
Age: 17
Position: Attacking midfielder
Not 18 until March, the North London-born left-footed creator is a special talent indeed, a winning combination of wondrous technique, wide-awake awareness, energy and humility. Opened his Premier League scoring account this campaign in a win v Nottingham Forest.

Elias MONTIEL

Club: Pachuca (Mex)
Age: 19
Position: Midfielder
The 19-year-old midfielder emerged at Pachuca in 2023 and has since become a regular in the team, playing both deep-lying and central midfield roles.

He made a handful of appearances in the Mexican side's CONCACAF Champions Cup victory in 2024, although remained on the bench for the final against Columbus Crew.

That victory qualified Pachuca for the 2025 Club World Cup and also meant they took part in the 2024 Intercontinental Cup. Montiel gained some global recognition during the tourrament, held in December, as Pachuca impressively defeated Copa Liberatores winners Botafogo of Brazil to set up a final with Real Madrid.

The Liga MX side lost that final 3-0, but it was still a good showcase for Montiel. Though Real Madrid players dominated the individual awards, he received the bronze ball as the third best player at the tournament behind Vinicius Junior and Federico Valverde.

Montiel boasts a wide range of passing and good awareness, meaning he can make quick first-time passes in tight areas. His passing game is very forward thinking which can lead to chance creation or raking passes that play team-mates into space.

On top of this he has the ability to dribble out of danger if needed before finding a short pass or making a more expansive play.

He has performed regularly as a deep-lying playmaker but has also the ability to operate further forward in midfield, using his creativity to conjure chances closer to goal.

There is also some defensive doggedness to go with his passing ability, and though slight in stature he is able to win the ball regularly in midfield thanks to his work-rate and reading of the game.

He'll be one to watch at the 2025 Club World Cup, which should raise his profile even further and potentially attract clubs elsewhere in the world. These include teams in Europe, and in the United States where the tournament will be held.

In that Club World Cup, Pachuca will once again face Real Madrid, having been drawn alongside them in Group H, as well as Red Bull Salzburg and Al Hilal.

Montiel has international experience with Mexico's U20s and was a key part of the team that won the 2024 CONCACAF U20 Championship, defeating the United States in the final.

Senior caps will surely follow soon, and 2025 could be the year his profile raises to the next level in both club and international football.

Christian ORDONEZ

Club: Velez Sarsfield (Arg)
Age: 20
Position: Midfielder
Throughout 2024, Ordonez was the beating heart of the midfield of Argentina's most consistent side of the year. Unglamorous but effective, covering lots of ground and always keeping it simple in possession, he was key as Velez won the 2024 Liga Profesional. Nearly joined Fenerbahce last summer.

Kendry PAEZ

Club: Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
Age: 17
Position: Attacking midfielder
Included in this list last year, the Chelsea-bound forward is now a marked man and expected to produce. Has not always found his second season easy, but the future remains bright. At 17 he has already scored in World Cup qualification and the Copa America. A South American Phil Foden.

Nicolo SAVONA

Club: Juventus (Ita)
Age: 21
Position: Right-back
The term "overnight sensation" might have been coined specifically for Savona, the erstwhile unknown quantity, whose career has suddenly gone into overdrive this season, not only smoothly effecting the transition from the Juventus NextGen side to a regular starting role for the *Bianconeri* in Serie A and the Champions League, but also earning quick-fire recognition with Italy's Under-21 and senior squad.

Savona, born and raised in the city of Aosta in the Italian Alps and a Juventus academy pupil from the age of eight, must still be pinching himself at the turn of events, to now be considered the Italian revelation of the year. But one thing is for sure; it would not have happened without the arrival at the Turin club last summer of new coach Thiago Motta. The incoming boss has well and truly bought into the mission to turn Juve into a youth development hot-spot, not hesitating to give elite opportunities to the likes of Savona, Swedish left-back Jonas Rouhi and Belgian winger Samuel Mbangula.

After catching Motta's eye during a pre-season training camp in Germany, Savona was duly promoted to the first-team squad and soon would be on an irresistible roll, making his debut for the *Bianconeri* on the opening weekend of the season as a second-half substitute in a 3-0 home win over Como, then enjoying his first Serie A start the following week in an away victory at Verona, deservedly earning a torrent of praise for his disciplined defending, constant raids into enemy territory and a headed goal.

He has not looked back since, now fully established as Motta's first-choice right-back, living the dream of frequent Champions League football, winning Under-21 caps and receiving a call-up in November for Italy's Nations League ties with Belgium and France. He may not have featured in either game, but he certainly would have enjoyed the experience all the same.

Many Italian pundits compare him to Italy international Riccardo Calafiori, who played under Motta at Bologna and is now starring at Arsenal. The pair certainly have plenty in common: tall build, tenacity, comfort on the ball and all-terrain versatility, with the ability to deliver the goods as either a full-back or in central defence. It is undeniably a thrilling combination.

Aleksandar PAVLOVIC

Club: Bayern Munich (Ger)
Age: 20
Position: Defensive midfielder
Now that Toni Kroos and Ilkay Gundogan have quit the international stage, Pavlovic looks the ideal candidate to anchor Germany's midfield. A fine strategist with an excellent range of passing, he was hugely unfortunate to miss out on Euro 2024 due to illness.

VITOR REIS

Club: Palmeiras (Bra)
Age: 19
Position: Centre-back
The latest Palmeiras product but, unlike Endrick and Estevao, he is not a forward. A classy centre-back with leadership qualities, sound reading of the game and the ability to set moves in motion, he is already attracting attention from Europe – though needs to fill out a bit physically.

Andy ROJAS

Club: Herediano (Crc)
Age: 19
Position: Forward
The 19-year-old already has four senior caps and one goal for Costa Rica and has played several attacking positions for both club and country. Rojas' dynamic dribbling ability suggests a future as a winger, which could be at a team in Europe before long.

Nathan SALIBA

Club: CF Montreal (Can)
Age: 20
Position: Midfielder
Montreal's box-to-box midfielder was named Canada's Young Player of the Year having broken into the national team in 2024, making his debut against the USA in September. The year ahead should be a big one for the 20-year-old as he looks to build on that breakthrough season in 2025.

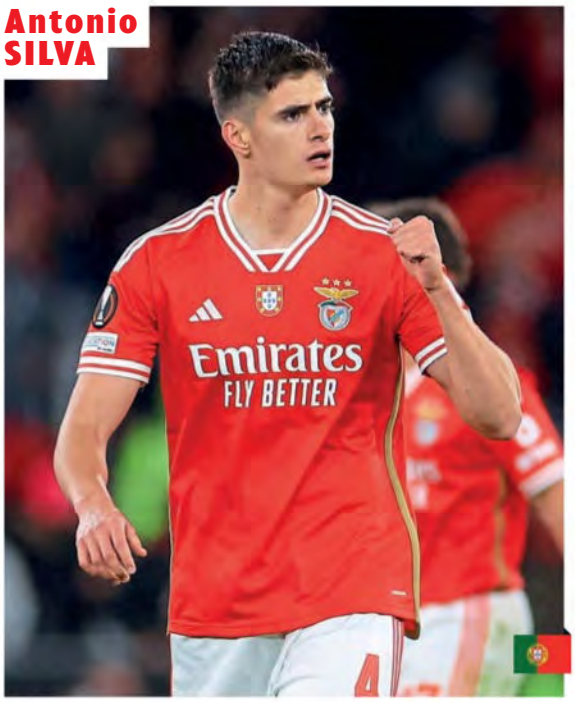
JUANLU Sanchez

Club: Sevilla (Spa)
Age: 21
Position: Midfielder/ right-back/right-winger
Exceptional local prodigy whose great strength is his high-calibre performances in a variety of positions. A member of Spain's Olympic gold medal-winning squad last summer, coming off the bench to score the winning goal against Morocco in the semi-finals.

ALISSON Santana

Club: Atletico Mineiro (Bra)
Age: 19
Position: Winger
Strapping left-footer who is deployed on the right wing, but can play anywhere across the front-line. Strong on the ball, with delicate touches and the capacity to find a pass while in full surge. Attracted Premier League interest last year.

Antonio SILVA



Benfica (Por)
Age: 21
Position: Centre-back
After being first-choice last season, Silva appears to have fallen down the pecking order under new Benfica coach Bruno Lage this campaign. Nonethless, he still has admirers aplenty across Europe and continues to fit the bill for Portugal.

Julio SOLER

Club: Bournemouth (Eng)
Age: 19
Position: Left-back
Quick little left-back, proficient in attack and defence. Born in Paraguay but grew up in Argentina, he played for them at the Paris Olympics and has since featured in the senior squad for World Cup qualifiers. Left Lanus for an initial £6.6m fee in January.

Cavan SULLIVAN

Club: Philadelphia Union (USA)
Age: 15
Position: Midfielder
The Philadelphia Union academy product is the most hyped US player since Freddy Adu, which comes with its own cautionary tale. In 2024, aged just 14 years and 293 days, he broke Adu's record as MLS's youngest player and has already agreed to join Manchester City.

Paul WANNER

Heidenheim (Ger)
Age: 19
Position: Attacking midfielder
Just turned 19, this tremendously-gifted attacking midfielder is only in his first season as a fully-fledged Bundesliga pro, but already is carving out a name for himself, so much so that Germany head coach Julian Nagelsmann recently went public with his desire to call up the youngster for November's UEFA Nations League double header with Bosnia & Herzegovina and Hungary.

To the surprise of many, Wanner, currently on loan at Heidenheim from Bayern Munich, would turn down the invitation, apparently still in two minds whether to nail his full international colours to the German or Austrian mast. What a dual-citizenship dilemma for the youngster: born in Austria but raised in south-west Germany, the son of a German father and Austrian mother and a stand-out for various young Germany XIs (Under-17, U18, U20 and U21).

Austria head coach Ralf Rangnick – himself a German – has long courted Wanner, and while Nagelsmann clearly was disappointed with the raw diamond's "holding pattern" plans, the *Bundestrainer* insists that he has no intention of giving up this particular ghost. "Naturally I would have been delighted to have him with me," declared Nagelsmann. "I don't see his decision as a dramatic one. He didn't say that he had no wish to play for us. The statements he's made show a very mature young man. His reasons are solid. I'm OK with that.

"I will fight to have top talents with us. Even though he's only at the start of his career and has much more to do, our dream is to have him playing a role for us at the next World Cup. I feel he wants to play for us. He is with our Under-21s now. Paul has a personal decision to make. He has to have pride for the nation he plays for. It has to come from the heart."

Wanner, under contract with Bayern until 2027, is undoubtedly a rare talent. Although not a mazy dribbler like fellow Bayern graduate Jamal Musiala, he has a raft of other gifts. He is a brilliant ball carrier and tempo source, almost impossible to dispossess when breaking into open field, his final-ball delivery invariably is timed to perfection, he works exceedingly hard off the ball, is a good finisher and can play as a number ten or on either flank.

Will he return to Bayern at the end of the season? Much will depend on whether the Bavarians succeed in their quest to bring in Leverkusen *wunderkind* Florian Wirtz. If that happens, Wanner probably will go out on loan again. If not, an Allianz Arena future may beckon.

Leny YORO

Club: Manchester United (Eng)
Age: 19
Position: Centre-back

Acquired from Lille last summer for an initial £52m transfer fee, the defender got off to the worst possible start at Old Trafford, fracturing the fifth metatarsal on his left foot in a pre-season friendly against Arsenal in the United States. After four months on the sidelines, he is now fit again, a rare item of good news at a once all-conquering club which has seriously lost its way of late.

For far too long, United's rearguard work has been a never-ending spin cycle of the shambolic, and a fully operational Yoro, one of the best young defenders on the European circuit today, can only be a positive. After all, some of the biggest clubs around were reportedly vying for his services last year, among them Real Madrid, PSG and Inter. He meets all the quality control requirements.

Yet another off the incredible assembly line that is the Greater Paris football factory, Yoro will, of course, need time to adjust to his new Premier League environment. Its mix of extreme pace, physicality and aerial assault is the antithesis of any sort of comfort zone, and it's also worth noting that the tall Frenchman has precious little experience of operating in a back-three, the preferred formula of recently-appointed Red Devils boss Ruben Amorim.

Though Yoro will be tested like never before, he has more than enough going for him to come out the other side. He has all the attributes of a top-class centre-back; he is quick, athletic, calm under pressure, strong on the ball and boasts a steely determination to prevail in duels. Remarkably for someone so young, he reads the game very well indeed and, according to his coaches at the Lille academy, was an extremely quick learner, needing little time to take on complex instructions and tactical nuances.

A stopper and sweeper in one excellent package, he is also very consistent, a by-product of a strong mentality and never-failing focus. It's not hard to see how he became a prodigy at Lille, making his first-team debut at the age of just 16 and becoming an automatic pick a year later, so impressive that he ousted French World Cup winner Samuel Umtiti.

"It's not normal to see a teenager with such maturity and technical qualities as Leny," declared former Lille coach Paulo Fonseca in a chat on the *Transfer Room* platform earlier this year. "For me, he will be one of the best defenders in France and probably Europe too. He's very level-headed. It's not easy when a young player begins to attract the attention of the best clubs. I watched him in training and his attitude did not change at all."

Kota TAKAI

Club: Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn)
Age: 20
Position: Centre-back

Players that win the J. League Young Player of the Year award often go to Europe and Takai is not far away. Well over six foot tall and a fine reader of the game, he made his Japan debut in September in a 7-0 victory over China.

Obed VARGAS

Club: Seattle Sounders (USA)
Age: 19
Position: Midfielder

It is easy to forget the Alaska-born midfielder is still only 19 as he's already appeared in four seasons for Seattle Sounders. He made a one-time switch from the USA to Mexico in 2024, and the USMNT might regret not being able to keep hold of him.

Kenan YILDIZ

Club: Juventus (Ita)
Age: 19
Position: Forward

That Juve rate the Turkey winger or second striker in the €80m bracket speaks for itself. Still only 19, the Bavarian-born youngster – who was on Bayern Munich's books for a decade in their youth academy – says he intends to stay at Juve for the next five years.

THE RISE OF JORDAN

After a remarkable year for Jordanian football in 2024, what's next for the West Asian minnows?

Words: John Duerden

Jordan have never appeared at the World Cup. Their clubs have never made big international signings to command the attention of supporters around the world, and their players have not made much of an impact in the big European leagues. Not all of that changed in 2024 but it was quite a year for football in the country – starting with the national team reaching the final of the Asian Cup and ending with a first-ever World Cup qualification spot within reach.

For years, Amman was seen as a tough place to go in World Cup qualification; a place to get in, do a job and then get out. For the big games at least, fans are loud, non-stop and it can be a hostile environment all round. In qualification for the 2014 World Cup, Jordan reached the fourth round and then famously defeated Japan and Australia at home. Indeed, all of the team's ten points came in four home games with all four away ending in defeat. It was enough to finish third, enter the play-offs and make a rare journey into the international football consciousness.

First was a tense Asian eliminator with Uzbekistan and a two-legged tie that ended 2-2. In one of the most exciting and dramatic penalty shootouts imaginable, Jordan won 9-8. The World Cup had never seemed so close – just 180 minutes away, via the two-legged inter-confederational play-off. Four years earlier, Bahrain had reached the same stage and played New Zealand. This time, however, it was not the best team from Oceania but one of the best from South America, more specifically one that had reached the semi-final in 2010 – Uruguay.

The South Americans were, unsurprisingly, not daunted at all by the Amman atmosphere and ran riot to silence a shocked home crowd. Luis Suarez and company returned to Montevideo with a 5-0 advantage. The only positive is that the second leg ended goalless without any further humiliation. While Egyptian legend Hossam Hassan, then-head coach, bore the brunt of the criticism for his selections and team tinkering, there was a clear gulf in class and experience that did not make it any less painful for fans.

That now feels like a long time ago.

Confidence had long since returned when the third round of qualification for the 2026 World Cup got underway in September, thanks to performances at the Asian Cup. There wasn't much hype around the team heading into the tournament hosted in Qatar, but the appointment of the Tunisian Hussein Ammouta as coach in the summer of 2023 was an interesting one. After the surprising hiring in the previous

Impressive...Jordan reached the final of the Asian Cup last year

decade of Ray Wilkins and Harry Redknapp, appointed by the English-football-loving Prince Ali bin Hussein, president of the Jordan Football Association and one-time FIFA presidency challenger to Sepp Blatter, the North African seemed more suited to the challenge of taking Jordan to the next level.

He wasn't the most famous name around but had an impressive CV that included taking Wydad AC to the Moroccan league title and then the African Champions League, and Morocco to the African Nations Championship in 2020. There was also a Qatar Stars League triumph. A hard-worker, meticulous planner able to get the best out of players, Ammouta was exactly what Jordan needed.

Expectations, however, were not high as the Asian Cup approached. In the final seven games of 2023, Jordan lost five and drew two. The year started with a friendly win over the hosts Qatar but the final warm-up match was a sobering one: a 6-1 thrashing at the hands of Japan. Nobody would have believed then that the losers would go further than the victors.

But when the group stage began, there were signs that it was coming together. It started with a 4-0 win over Malaysia, expected but clinical. Less expected was the game against South Korea with the mighty Taegeuk Warriors needing a stoppage-time own goal to earn a 2-2 draw. Then a defeat against Bahrain meant that Jordan squeezed into the second round as one of the best third-place finishers.

The 3-2 win over Iraq, one of the favourites, was epic, controversial and their first-ever victory in a knockout game. Iraq took a 2-1 lead with 14 minutes remaining but Aymen Hussein was sent off for his celebration. Two stoppage-time goals gave Jordan the spoils and the team a new energy. Their resilience was shown in a battling 1-0 win over Tajikistan which earned a semi-final against South Korea.

"Hello my dear Jordanian fans. I will leave coaching the Jordanian national football team for family reasons after three or four months. Sorry to all of you, great Jordanian people"

Hussein Ammouta announcing his decision to step down as Jordan coach

Saudi victory...the World Cup qualifying win was Ammouta's final game in charge

The Koreans had been struggling under Jurgen Klinsmann, but they had still knocked out tournament contenders Saudi Arabia and Australia. Nevertheless, Jordan beat them 2-0 and deserved to do so. It was a masterclass of defensive solidity, teamwork and slick counter-attacking. The national team had sent out a massive statement, outclassing one of Asia's giants.

Then came the final against the hosts and defending champions Qatar. When Yazan Al Naimat equalised with 17 minutes remaining, it looked as if it could be Jordan's day. But Akram Afif had other plans, completing a hat-trick of penalties, and that was that.

Still, for the likes of Al Naimat, his strike partner Mousa Al Tamari (the only European-based player, at Montpellier) and towering defender Yazan Al Arab, the tournament had seen them become breakout continental stars. The future looked bright, especially for hopes of World Cup qualification.

That is because Asia's World Cup allocation is expanding from four in 2022 to eight in 2026. This offers hope to Jordan and other teams that were not that far away in the past but were always going to struggle to consistently challenge the continental powerhouses. Four more spots mean that a whole host of other teams can now dream.

After the Asian Cup, Jordan won four on the trot in the second round of qualification. The last was the best as they beat Saudi Arabia 2-1 in Riyadh in June to show that reaching the final was no fluke. They moved into top spot in the group, looking forward to the next, and crucial stage, with confidence.

But then came a hammer blow: Ammouta announced that he would be stepping down as head coach.

Vital win...Jordan players celebrate during June's victory over Saudi Arabia

"Hello my dear Jordanian fans," he wrote on Instagram, breaking the news to a shocked nation. "I will leave coaching the Jordanian national football team for family reasons after three or four months. Sorry to all of you, great Jordanian people."

Fans were devastated. The Jordan FA said it "appreciates the special circumstances that prevented coach Ammouta from continuing to lead the national team. The achievements made under Ammouta's leadership will always be highly valued and appreciated."

It was so appreciated that the FA tried to hire someone similar to the outgoing boss. Jamal Sellami was Moroccan, had won the league and led Morocco to the 2018 African Nations Championship. Now his task was to lead Jordan in a third-round qualification group comprising South Korea, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman and Palestine.

After six games out of ten, Jordan are third, two points behind Iraq in the second of the two automatic places. They would have been level had they not let their lead slip against Kuwait in November. With South Korea, recovering from the chaos of the Klinsmann year, looking secure in first place, Jordan and Iraq are likely to battle it out for second as qualification resumes in March. Even if Jordan fail there is hope; finishing third or fourth means there is another stage where six teams compete for the two final automatic places.

Qualification could make a real difference. Jordan is in a region with countries like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar but are not blessed with the natural resources that help those countries buy world famous players and/or stage huge sporting events. The Jordan league has been dominated for decades by fierce rivals Al Wehdat, who have won 17 titles, and Al Faisaly with 35. These two Amman clubs, the former having grown from the Palestinian refugee camps and the latter regarded as more of the establishment club, may have had massive success at home but are not continental powerhouses.

There have been few appearances in Asia's Champions League. Most of the time they have been confined to the AFC Cup – now rebranded as the AFC Champions League Two but still very much the second-tier tournament in terms of profile. The national team is not quite as reliant on the big two as it once was. Of the Asian Cup squad, 11 came from Wehdat or Faisaly but there is a growing variety. The performances in Qatar saw FC Seoul sign Yazan Al Arab and others have headed overseas too. There were 11 foreign-based stars in the most recent qualifiers.

There isn't much money in the local league, one held back by a lack of private investment. Clubs tend not to own their homes, which limits their ability to grow revenue, and there is still much to improve in terms of matchday experience and marketing. The World Cup would not be a silver bullet – there is still not enough clear vision and leadership about where the league wants to go – but the hope is that qualification would mean more investment, sponsorship and profile.

Such benefits don't always flow from World Cup qualification and wouldn't be at the forefront of the minds of fans who watch the March and June qualifiers. They just want to see their team on the biggest stage. If they start 2025 as they started 2024 then it is certainly possible.

Breakout stars...defender Yazan Al Arab and forwards Yazan Al Naimat and Mousa Al Tamari (with four and three goals respectively) all enhanced their reputations at the Asian Cup

POSTER BOY

As the most expensive player in the history of the Canadian Premier League, Kwasi Poku is a walking advert for his country's domestic football scene

Words: Danny Lewis

The start of a new year is often the perfect time to reflect on what has come before, and there won't be too many who have more to reflect on than Kwasi Poku at the start of 2025.

Rewind 12 months, and the 21-year-old was a left wing-back for Canadian Premier League (CPL) side Forge FC. Now, he is a Canada international striker playing in Europe.

It took a spate of injuries in the Forge squad for Poku to be thrust forward by his then-manager Bobby Smyrniotis, but, as the Ontario native tells *World Soccer*, there was never any doubt in his mind that he could adapt.

"It's something that I saw myself doing later on in my career, and I'm happy that it's happened now," he says. "I think it's a good thing to be versatile, but at the end of the day, you want to pin down a position and find your spot in a team. That's the plan."

Poku had long been regarded as one of the CPL's brightest talents, nominated for the league's Under-21 Player of the Year in 2023 and playing an active role in two championship-winning teams. But it was the shift forward into the front-line that saw him truly take centre stage at Tim Hortons Field, and make on-looking scouts sit up and take notice.

After converting to the attack, Poku scored ten goals in 14 appearances in all competitions, including two in the Canadian Championship against Major League Soccer opposition in CF Montreal and Toronto FC. Forge beat the former and were knocked out on away goals by the latter, with Poku a constant thorn in the side of higher-level opponents.

At the end of the season, Poku was named the league's Best Canadian Under-21 Player, despite leaving Forge halfway through the campaign having been snapped up by Belgian second-tier side RWD Molenbeek for a CPL-record transfer fee.

The CPL was formed in 2017, and part of its aspiration for growth is becoming a league that is known for developing talent. With that in mind, Poku is a poster boy for the league that he has left behind. Not that the fee, reportedly around €500,000, bothers him. "I don't like to concern myself too much on the figures, but it's a nice thing to have under my resumé."

There had been other offers for Poku, both in the past and at the time, but it was RWDM's "intriguing plan" that convinced him to make the move before Forge's campaign had come to an end.

"I'm not interested in joining teams that don't have me in their plans right away," he says. "I don't want to travel across the world to sit on the bench, so it was thinking that they could fit me straight into the team, which they have, and I've found my feet here. I'm enjoying myself."

He had a successful start to life in Belgium, notably scoring in the Belgian Cup before recording his first league goals with a brace against Jong Genk. Both strikes would have been familiar to supporters that had seen Poku's progress as a number nine at Forge: sharp movement and crisp finishing inside the penalty area.

Poku admits that things went "a bit stagnant" after that, but he is enjoying the process of adapting.

"It's all about learning. Not many players go straight into a league

Poster boy...Kwasi Poku in action for RWD Molenbeek

Breakthrough... Poku starring for Forge FC in 2022

and just kill the league right away. So I'm just being patient, working on what I can work on, being where my feet are, and I'm enjoying myself. I'm enjoying the process."

While Poku looked to establish himself in Belgium's second tier, he was given reasons to celebrate from back in Canada. Less than two months after leaving Forge, Poku received a call-up to the national team from head coach Jesse Marsch, something he describes as "a dream come true". Having the likes of Bayern Munich's Alphonso Davies, Lille's Jonathan David, Porto's Stephen Eustaquio and Nice's Moise Bombito alongside him in the camp will only have added to that.

"I think it's every kid's dream growing up playing soccer in Canada," Poku says with a grin. "Everyone wants to wear the national shirt and play with the guys that we watched growing up. It was a surreal feeling, and I got to learn a lot from the world-class players that are on that team."

He also made the most of working with Marsch.

"He coached like I've never been coached before. He has a very unique style, the Red Bull style. It's very forward-thinking, very press-heavy. It was definitely something different and I really enjoyed it."

The crowning glory of that camp was coming on as a late substitute in Canada's only match of October, a friendly against Panama. What was going through his head while entering the field of play?

"Man, I just wanted to run," laughs Poku. "That's what I was brought on to do for the last five minutes. So I said: 'I'm just going to run for the team.'"

He wasn't called up for November's CONCACAF Nations League matches against Suriname, but he accepts that the competition for places is tough.

Bustling forward ...Poku holds off a challenge in the Belgian second tier

"There's a lot of great, talented players within Canada and I think that it's difficult to get called every single time, especially being a new call-up."

Canada's next test will come in March, when they face Mexico in the Nations League semi-final, but Poku says he is "more focused on the task at hand" of firing his club team into the top flight.

"Obviously, if we [RWDM] get into the first division, it will be much easier and more likely to get called up. But I think that's more of a by-product of my career," says Poku, who scored his third league goal of the season in a 4-4 draw against RFC Seraing in December. "I'm focused on where I am here in Belgium, and if I get called up, that'd be great, but if I don't it's fine also."

He displays a similar attitude when looking at the possibility of being part of an historic World Cup on home soil. "Obviously, I do want to be involved in the 2026 World Cup, [but] I don't think it is currently on my mind," he says. "I'm someone who likes to focus on the task at hand, I like to be where my feet are, but being where my feet are and doing well here will bring a 2026 World Cup call-up, possibly. So, I like to focus where I'm at and hopefully that's in my future."

Focusing on the here and now is a mindset that was ingrained upon him working under Smyrniotis at Forge. That is also the source of his winning mentality.

In the short history of the CPL, Forge have been the dominant force, winning the championship crown four times. In 2024, they topped the regular league season but lost in the play-off final – perhaps due to the absence of their top scorer. "Some of my best friends are on that team, so I was definitely watching and cheering them on," he says.

> "I don't want to travel across the world to sit on the bench"
> Poku on his move to Belgian side RWD Molenbeek

That defeat prevented Forge from winning a third consecutive title, and fifth in total, though they remain the CPL's most successful club. It is an environment that Poku believes has aided his development.

"Many players in their career go into places where they're not expecting much. But right away, I had a lot of weight on my shoulders," he says. "I knew what it meant to play for Forge. I knew that they were the champions, and that in a league like the CPL, they expected to win every single year.

"I had to go into every game hungry and knowing that every other team would give their best performance against us. It really instilled a winning mentality within me."

It is exactly that mindset that RWDM need as they seek to return to the Jupiler Pro League. They earned promotion in 2023 but were relegated after one season, and Poku says "it would be huge" to get back up at the first attempt.

"I've only been in a professional environment where I've had to win. I started my professional career with Forge, they had a winning mentality, and now I'm with a team that has another winning mentality.

"I think it's a smooth transition on the mental front that they expect similar things, and they expect to win, and we want to win, and I want to win.

"I think [the top tier] is where this team belongs, and I think they know that. It would be a huge achievement for me, but also for RWDM, and that's the goal for all of us. I moved from a team with a winning mentality to another team with a winning mentality. We expect to win here."

Dream come true ...Poku made his Canada debut in October 2024

MORENA RAMOREBOLI

"We should always be competing for places in major tournaments"

Parachuted into the role as Botswana interim head coach with just two 2025 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers remaining, the 44-year-old South African guided the country to the AFCON finals for only the second time in their history

Africa Cup of Nations qualification was secured with a 1-1 draw against Egypt. Did you expect to get that draw in Cairo?
Honestly speaking, let me say this was how we planned for the game. One, we knew that they would want to keep the ball, and secondly that they would change the team and bring in a lot of quick players. We had to simplify our approach and tighten up our defence and we knew that by doing that we might have a chance.

We were very fortunate to get a goal early, which I think helped us to settle quicker into the match. When you score early against a top team, it gives the players belief. It was also very simple again to motivate them at half-time because they knew they had to survive for 45 minutes to qualify.

How would you describe the circumstances around taking charge of Botswana ahead of November's qualifiers, given you were also head coach of Jwaneng Galaxy?
I was given the responsibility to provide a service by the president of the Botswana Football Association, and I think I did that. I went out to make sure that I represented the country, and I also provide a service. I regard myself like a chef who was asked to prepare a meal. I have prepared the meal. The meal was served, and now it is up to the people who were eating the meal to say: "It was good. We want you to prepare another meal for us."

I have my responsibility at Jwaneng Galaxy, which also needs my attention, and I'm trying my level best to make sure that I don't divide my focus. If the Botswana job is offered to me, I'll take it. If it doesn't come, I'll accept that and appreciate the opportunity they gave to me.

How difficult was it to pick up from where your predecessor Didier Gomes da Rosa left off, because he got some unexpectedly good results in qualifying?
It was not an easy step because each coach has his own tactics, his own beliefs. I was coming into a team that had just won two matches [against Cape Verde] by playing in a low block, managing to score two goals and not conceding. Those two matches put Botswana in a position to qualify for the Cup of Nations.

I felt, coming into the job, a lot was expected of me. I had meetings with the players, just to understand what was happening. And after that, I told myself: "Yes, I'm going to bring some changes, but I'm not going to move too much away from what the coach was doing."

What the coach [Da Gomes Rosa] did was lay the foundation. So it was easy for me to manage and control certain things, but I didn't make too many changes and I didn't want to start something new because whatever the coach had been doing was working.

Last season you took Jwaneng Galaxy to the group phase of the African Champions League. How disappointing was it then for you not to qualify again, to build on what you had achieved last season?
Disappointing. But let's be honest, we were playing against one of the big teams in the continent in Orlando Pirates of South Africa. We had shocked them last season, so obviously things were going to be difficult the second time around. We had quickly to accept and understand that it was not meant to be.

Not many Botswana players are based at clubs outside the country. Is there talent that clubs are missing out on?
I think when you compete at the Africa Cup of Nations finals, or when you compete and do well in continental competition, that's when outside clubs take more interest in Botswana. At the moment, we only have four players who are playing outside the country, and they are playing in Africa – one in South Africa, two in Morocco, one in Algeria. If we want to increase the pool of players going outside, we need to first be stable in our performance, and we should always be competing for places in major tournaments. That is when the scouts will come.

Are you a believer that the more players you have at clubs in Europe, the better it is for your national team? Or do you think that league standards in Africa are sometimes underrated?
I think it serves both ways. The standard in Europe is very high in terms of coaching. Players are getting lots of good coaching at that level. Then there is also better discipline and more professionalism. There is a lot of talent locally, but the biggest challenge is how we manage that talent, how we coach that talent, how we grow this talent. So, I'll say it's important to have those that play overseas, so that they become an inspiration to those that are home based.

But at the same time, if you have locals who are coachable, if you have locals who are disciplined, if you have locals who are ambitious and who understand what it takes to get to the top, then they too are very important. If you have local players who are not ambitious, they are not going to achieve anything.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

BFA
BFA

Scotland

Until recently, Scottish clubs have been resistant to multi-club ownership groups. But, as Steve Menary explains, things are beginning to change…

Scotland has the second-oldest football association in the world, a national team that has appeared at eight World Cup finals and four European Championships, and three clubs with UEFA honours in their trophy cabinets – not a bad record for a country of only 5.5 million.

Yet for all of that footballing pedigree, the flurry of multi-club ownership groups that have sprung up around the world in recent years have mostly overlooked Scotland.

Until recently, interest in the country's clubs has been restricted to minority stakes that have led to indirect MCO links. For example, a 4.3 per cent stake in Rangers is held by investment firm Tifosy, whose founder, Fausto Zanetton, has links to Eagle Football Holdings, which owns or controls major clubs including Crystal Palace, Lyon and South American champions Botafogo.

On the other side of Glasgow, Dermot Desmond is Celtic's largest shareholder with a 34.6 per cent stake and controls a quarter of League of Ireland side Shamrock Rovers. Celtic's second largest shareholder is Lindsell Train, with a 19.7 per cent holding, who also owns 11.3 per cent of Juventus and has a stake in Manchester United.

Dominant…Rangers and Celtic are still the top dogs in Scottish football

A 9.9 per cent stake in Aberdeen is held by US group AMB Sports & Entertainment, which owns Major League Soccer franchise Atlanta United. Dundee and Dundee United have strategic partnerships with English sides Burnley and Fulham respectively.

These deals never really tested the Scottish Football Association's Article 13 covering dual interests in clubs, which states that no one person who owns existing shares in another club within UEFA can hold more than 9.9 per cent in a Scottish club.

That all began to change when Motherwell, which is majority owned by fan group the Well Society, released

a tongue-in-cheek video inspired by Taylor Swift appealing for investment.

US film producer entrepreneur Erik Barmack and his wife Courtney started negotiations with Motherwell, which fell through after objections from fans who feared losing control, but other deals have emerged.

The Black Knight Football Group (covered in these pages back in November) had been looking for a Scottish club to invest in but instead of Motherwell agreed a deal to buy a 25 per cent stake in Edinburgh side Hibernian for £6 million. BKFG owns Bournemouth in England, Auckland FC in New Zealand and a 33 per cent stake in French side Lorient, but instead of challenging the proposals, the SFA waved the deal through and overseas interest in Scotland has continued.

Dundee United owner Mark Ogren has been linked with an exit before and, in October 2024, media reports suggested that Danish billionaire Anders Holch Povlsen, owner of FC Midtjylland (more on them on page 32), was interested.

The German owners of Scottish Championship side Dunfermline Athletic, DAFC Fussball GmbH, put the 75 per cent stake they acquired in 2021 up for sale in the summer of 2024 and attracted a number of bids.

The owner of Brighton, Tony Bloom, who also has a stake in Belgian side Union Saint-Gilloise, also reportedly wants to invest up to £10m in Hearts through a deal that would provide some working capital and a stake of up to 25 per cent.

Hearts have been the main challengers to the duopoly of Celtic and Rangers in recent years, finishing third in two of the last three seasons, but have struggled this year. The club has already been working with Jamestown Analytics, which was founded by Bloom and helped fuel Brighton's impressive rise up the Premier League.

Jamestown was instrumental in the hiring of Neil Critchley as Hearts' new head coach in October. Rather than becoming a Brighton feeder club, Bloom is understood to believe a data-led approach that proved so successful in England and Belgium could help the Edinburgh club bridge the gap with the Glasgow duo. No other Scottish club has won the title since Aberdeen in 1984-85.

Hearts interest... Brighton owner Tony Bloom

Data-led appointment... Hearts head coach Neil Critchley

"Celtic and Rangers don't even spend fees on Scottish players, they just wait for them to be out of contract," explains Alan Russell, the chief executive of Supporters Direct Scotland, which helps fans in the country take control of their clubs. "It's a strategic decision to not spend money in Scotland as that will allow the other clubs to close the gap financially.

"There's a lot of good footballers that have come through Scottish football and the number it takes to get into a club here is so much lower than in England. In theory, it also doesn't take much to get into Europe within one or two seasons. The difference between doing really well and skidding along the bottom of the Premiership isn't very much.

"The vast amount of clubs here are losing money. It's a low-risk investment as you don't need to spend much to get high up the SPL and flip the club onto another investor."

Supporters Direct Scotland has helped fans take a majority control at eight Scottish clubs. Greenock Morton and Partick Thistle are in the Championship, Stirling Albion are in League One, and Annan Athletic and Clyde the league below.

While these clubs are unlikely to challenge Celtic and Rangers, the remaining trio of Motherwell, Hearts and St Mirren face the Glasgow giants four times a season in the Premiership. Selling a stake could provide the funds to help

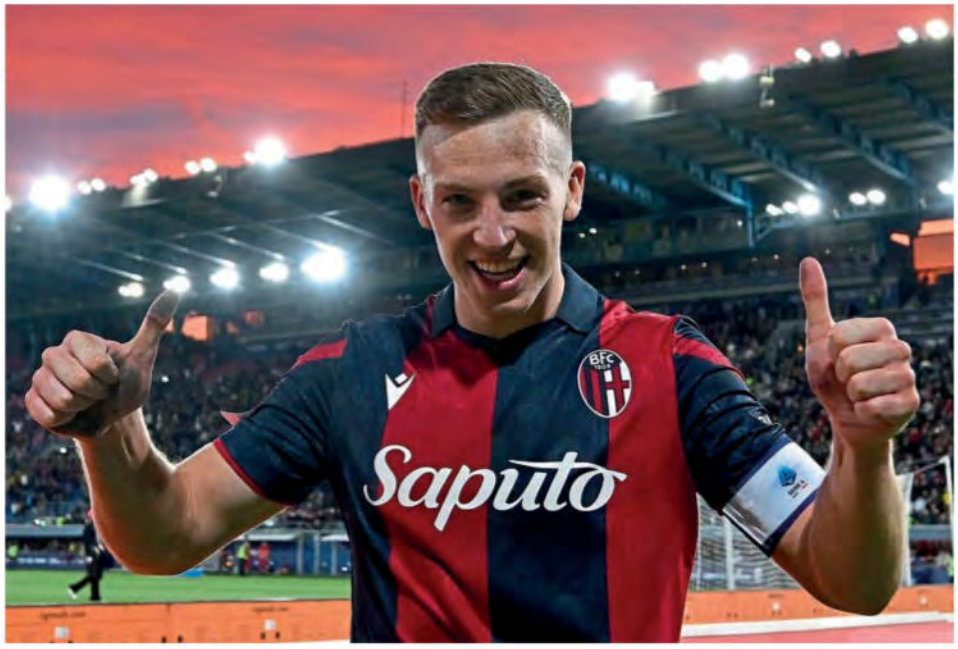
these clubs close the gap, while the proximity to England could also attract investors.

Fernando Roitman, founder of research consultancy CIES Sports Intelligence, which tracks MCO deals, says: "Most MCO structures are centred around player development and player transfers. In this case, I believe that the possibility to access a market that is so close to the richest domestic league [the English Premier League] in the world represents one of the main reasons for prospective investors looking at buying a club in Scotland."

So far, interest in Scottish clubs has come from the US, where the favourites to buy Dunfermline are based. But Alan Russell believes the recent success of a contingent of Scottish defensive and midfield players in Italy could attract interest from MCO groups with clubs in the country.

Last summer, Scott McTominay and Billy Gilmour joined Napoli from Manchester United and Brighton and have largely justified fees of £25.7m and £16m respectively. Striker Che Adams has found the net for Torino since joining from Southampton in the close season, but what may interest MCO owners is the success of players signed directly from Scottish clubs.

Signed from Aberdeen in 2022, attacking midfielder Lewis Ferguson helped Bologna qualify for this season's



Scottish Premiership poster boy...Bologna captain Lewis Ferguson

> "The possibility to access a market that is so close to the richest domestic league in the world represents one of the main reasons for prospective investors looking at buying a club in Scotland"
>
> Fernando Roitman, CIES Sports Intelligence

Supporter-owned... Scottish Premiership side Motherwell are owned by the fans

Champions League, left-back Josh Doig left Hibernian the same year for Hellas Verona and has since switched to Sassuolo, while midfielder Liam Henderson has played for five Italian clubs, currently at Empoli, since leaving Celtic in 2018.

Another Scot, full-back Aaron Hickey swapped Hearts for Bologna in 2020 and was snapped up two years later by Premier League side Brentford, illustrating how a sojourn in Italy can attract wealthier clubs. Given that developing players to increase their sell-on value is at the heart of the MCO approach, this will almost certainly have been noticed by putative investors.

Apart from Adams, these Scottish players are all defenders or midfielders that have thrived in the Italian style of defensive solidity and grown in value – and that would also have not gone unnoticed.

The days of Scotland being overlooked by MCO investors may soon be a thing of the past.

MCO round-up

More news from the world of multi-club ownership...

Same owners ...Mexican sides Pachuca and Leon

• GRUPO PACHUCA SET TO SEND TWO TEAMS TO CLUB WORLD CUP

FIFA allowed two Mexican teams, both owned by Grupo Pachuca, to be included in the draw for its new Club World Cup which will be staged in the USA this summer.

Costa Rican side Liga Deportiva Alajuelense had sent a formal complaint to FIFA saying that the participation of Club de Futbol Pachuca and Club Leon would breach Article 10.1 of the rules for the competition, which states that "no competing club may hold or deal in the securities or shares of any other club".

The two clubs are among 11 teams in Grupo Pachuca's MCO portfolio, which stretches from its native Mexico to Australia, Chile and the United States.

• NEW MCO EMERGES IN BELGIUM

Belgian club KMSK Deinze has become the first club in a new MCO portfolio being set up by AAD Invest, a group of investors based in neighbouring Luxembourg. Deinze had previously been owned by ACA Partners, a Singaporean-based MCO group which also has minority stakes in English side Charlton Athletic and Juventud Torremolinos CF of Spain, but bankruptcy was looming at Deinze until the intervention of AAD Invest, which is working with investment groups Global Emerging Markets and Unicorn Gulf to build an MCO portfolio.

• TAKEOVER AT SHEFFIELD UNITED

Another MCO group is being broken up after the Saudi Arabian owner of English Championship side Sheffield United – who were relegated from the Premier League in 2023-24 – agreed to sell the club. Prince Abdullah's United World group includes Al Hilal United from the UAE, French side LB Chateauroux, Belgium's K Beerschot VA and Kerala United from India.

Sheffield United's new American owners, the COH Sports consortium led by Steven Rosen of Resilience Capital Partners and Helmy Eltoukhy, the chairman of biotech firm Guardant Health Inc, received full clearance from the English Football League in December ahead of the takeover.

New owners incoming...Belgian club KMSK Deinze

Glenn Moore

Daunting draw for Euro 2025 debutants

Wales and Poland were fired to this summer's European Championship by their respective lodestars – but now the real test begins

For a fortnight after qualifying for Euro 2025, Jess Fishlock and Ewa Pajor could finally bask in the prospect of gracing the international platform that their talent deserved. Then reality, in the form of the group-stage draw, arrived.

Fishlock's Wales were rewarded for their first-ever qualification to a major tournament with a glamour tie against holders and neighbours England, but in the context of a brutal Group D that also includes France and the Netherlands.

Pajor's Poland were given a marginally easier but still daunting baptism for their international debut, paired in Group C with eight-time winners Germany, a Sweden side that has been in four tournament semi-finals in the past six years, and 2017 finalists Denmark.

The best women's footballer Wales have produced, Fishlock turned 38 on January 14. She has spent the last decade in the engine room at Seattle Reign, playing more minutes in NWSL history than anyone bar team-mate Lauren Barnes and New Zealand's Abby Erceg.

In between, the midfielder with an eye for a pass, tackle and goal has played on loan in Europe and Australia, picking up titles on the way including the 2019 Champions League with Lyon.

Fishlock scored five goals in qualifying as Wales topped their Nations League B group to reach the play-offs, then netted against semi-final opponents Slovakia. She then helped Wales establish a narrow aggregate lead in front of a 25,000 crowd in Dublin only for a hamstring injury to force her off. She spent the last 30 minutes watching through cupped hands from the bench as Wales edged the Republic of Ireland 2-1 on the night and 3-2 overall.

> "This is something we have been working towards as a nation for 20 years"
>
> Wales captain Jess Fishlock on qualifying for Euro 2025

The group that both debutants would have wished for was A, which contained the hosts Switzerland, Iceland and Norway. As it was, Finland were the lucky team from pot four drawn into that section. Group B features world champions Spain alongside Belgium, Italy and Portugal.

"I think the winner of Group D can win the whole tournament because that is the quality and the strength of the group," declared the Netherlands coach Andries Jonker, who will face his compatriot Sarina Wiegman, a winner with the Dutch in 2017 and England in 2022.

The Dutch begin against Wales whose lodestar, Fishlock, had seemed destined to join the list of great players who, by virtue of playing for modest countries, never appeared at the big events with their nations failing to reach a World Cup or European Championship. The midfielder was also left out of Team GB's Olympic squads in both 2012 and 2021.

Pajor was luckier. She was not just on the pitch but also scored late in Poland's play-off final second leg against Austria to seal a 2-0 aggregate win. That followed three goals in the semi-final success over Romania.

Poland icon ...Ewa Pajor

The 28-year-old has been earmarked as a star ever since she scored within two minutes of making her debut as a 15-year-old for Medyk Konin in the Polish top flight. A year later, she made her international debut, scoring within ten minutes.

Nine trophy-laden seasons with Wolfsburg followed before she joined Barcelona last summer. The goals have continued to flow and another league title, her eighth in three countries, already seems certain.

But the Euros will be a new adventure, both for her and her team, which possesses a healthy core of players with major league experience. Defender Paulina Dudek has been with Paris Saint-Germain since 2018 while others include forward Natalia Padilla (Seville, on loan from Bayern Munich), West Ham goalkeeper Kinga Szemik and midfielder Dominika Grabowska (Hoffenheim).

Besides Fishlock, Wales have Seattle team-mate, midfielder Angharad James, Manchester United defender Hayley Ladd and, if she recovers from an ACL injury in time, Chelsea's Sophie Ingle.

"This is something we have been working towards as a nation for 20 years," a relieved Fishlock said after Wales qualified, and the effect for both countries could be huge.

Wales lodestar ...Jess Fishlock

"It's going to increase participation, it's going to increase attendances, it's going to increase interest, sponsorships and commercial," said ex-Wales striker Helen Ward recalling how the men's team's qualification for Euro 2016 turbo-charged the sport in Wales.

Even before qualification there was a push in Poland to grow the women's game. The federation even applied to stage the finals themselves and, although that bid failed, they are hosting the U19 Women's Euros this year and the U20 Women's World Cup in 2026.

Gdansk has been established as the team's home and drew a record 8,449 to the Romania tie. There is also investment in training up coaches and expanding opportunities for girls.

The benefit of qualifying can be seen with Portugal, who made their big-time debut at Euro 2017 and have since reached three major tournaments. This has stimulated growth, reflected in a crowd of more than 40,000 attending their play-off tie against the Czech Republic in Porto.

There are also growing financial rewards. This year's finals will have a prize fund of £34m, an eighth of that at the men's event but more than double that of 2022, with players receiving a third of the cash.

Thun's modest arena will host the opening game between Iceland and Finland on July 2, before Switzerland meet Norway later that day in Basel's 38,500-seater St Jakob-Park, which will also stage the final on July 27.

European leagues round-up

WSL leaders... Chelsea top the table

ENGLAND

Defending champions Chelsea went into the Women's Super League winter break with a six-point lead over Manchester City, with Arsenal and Manchester United a further point behind.

Blues boss Sonia Bompastor began her managerial reign with 14 wins in the WSL and Champions League before a surprise 1-1 draw at struggling Leicester in the final league match of 2024 (in which Chelsea had 28 shots to two).

Mid-table Aston Villa sacked Robert de Pauw after just six months in charge.

WSL attendances are on course to treble in three years with the sport now ranked fourth in the UK behind the men's game, horseracing and rugby union.

Still dominant ...Barca's Aitana Bonmati

GERMANY

Wolfsburg and Bayern Munich have won the last 12 Frauen-Bundesliga titles between them, but now their duopoly is under threat.

Thanks to the goals of Laura Freigang, Eintracht Frankfurt were propelled to status of winter champions with Bayer Leverkusen making it a four-way contest. By Christmas, Bayern and Frankfurt were separated by goal difference with the Lady Wolves a point behind and Leverkusen a further two points adrift (with a game in hand).

The league is set to follow the WSL by moving out from under the wing of the national federation and establishing their own company to run the competition.

Goal machine... Laura Freigang

FRANCE

Lyon adapted as seamlessly to Joe Montemurro replacing Bompastor as Chelsea did to the Frenchwoman taking over from Emma Hayes. A draw at Paris FC in October was the champions' only blip, but that was followed the following week by a 1-0 win over perennial rivals Paris Saint-Germain. Lyon went into 2025 three points clear of PSG with Paris FC four further points adrift.

ITALY

After two seasons in which Roma have been top dogs, Juventus ended 2024 on course to regain their crown with a seven-point lead over both the champions and Inter. Massimiliano Canzi, a veteran coach but in his first season in women's football, has revived a team that had faltered under Montemurro after a bright start – even if there was another early European exit.

SPAIN

Barcelona have maintained their stranglehold on Liga F, winning all 13 matches before Christmas to establish an 11-point lead over Real Madrid. Although the latter had two games in hand, Barca's 4-0 win in the capital highlighted their superiority.

With 57 goals scored, Barca also dominated the scoring charts with Ewa Pajor (ten) on top. Only Granada's Nigerian Edna Imade interrupted a top four that also included Alexia Putellas and Caroline Graham Hansen.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Wolfsburg's 6-1 drubbing of Roma on Matchday 5, in which Iceland's Sveindis Jane Jonsdottir scored four goals in the last half-hour, confirmed the last eight line-up.

For the first time, all quarter-finalists come from just four countries: England (three), Germany (two), Spain (two) and France (one). The draw will be made on February 7 with the ties in March.

Quarter-final seeded teams: Lyon, Chelsea, Arsenal, Barcelona.
Un-seeded: Wolfsburg, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Manchester City.

Into the knockouts...Wolfsburg thrashed Roma 6-1 to seal their UCL progress

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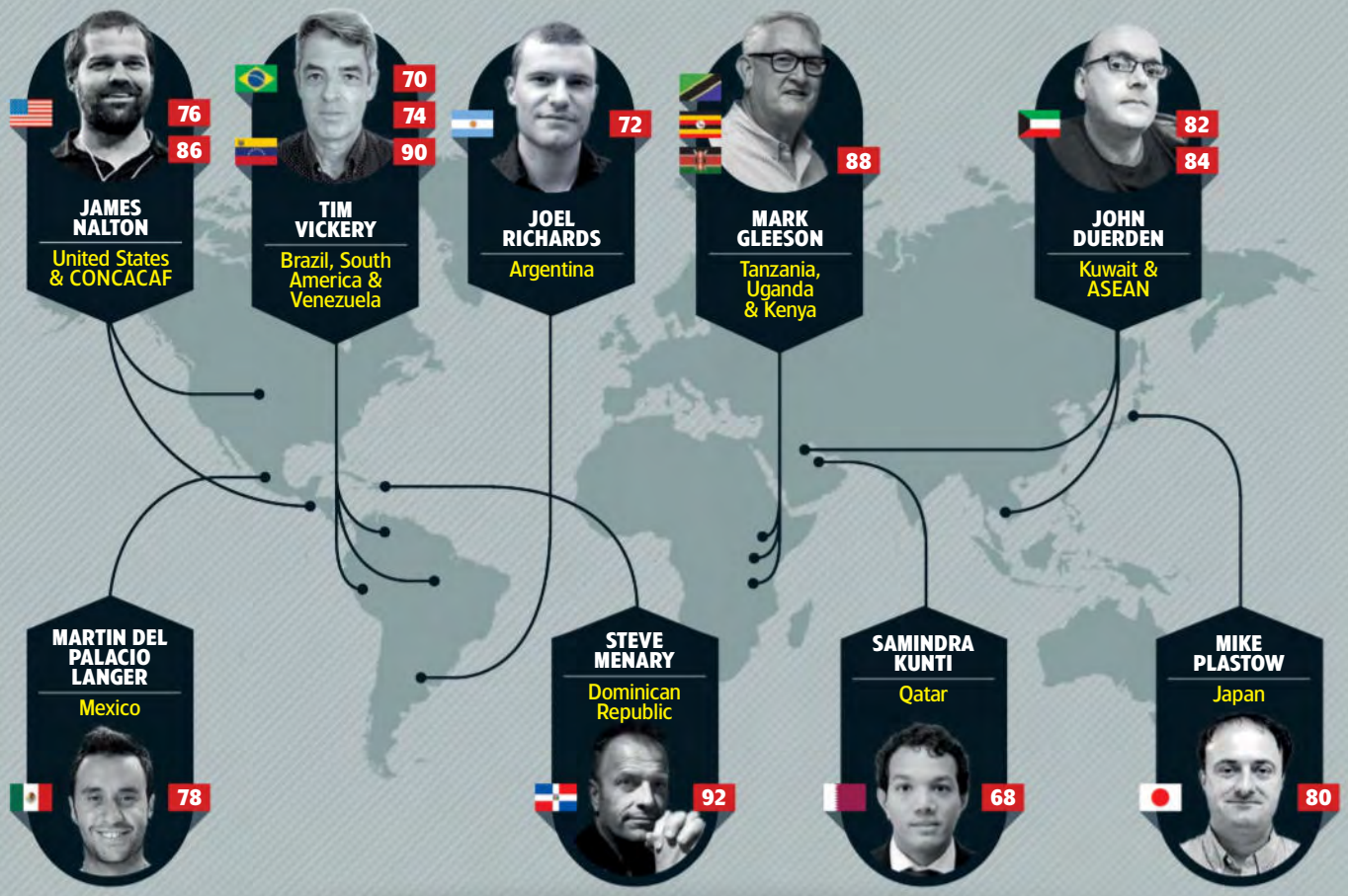

Brazilian kings ...Botafogo add domestic crown to Copa Libertadores triumph

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SAMINDRA KUNTI

Real Madrid add another trophy to 2024 haul

Spanish and European champions lift the FIFA Intercontinental Cup after underwhelming inaugural competition in Qatar

Real Madrid wrapped up 2024 in style with a 3-0 victory against Pachuca of Mexico to claim the Intercontinental Cup, a new FIFA competition that is seeking relevance in a congested calendar.

The new tournament – a modern reincarnation of the old Intercontinental Cup that pitted the best club in Europe against the best club from South America – served as a calendar replacement for the Club World Cup, which will be revived in the summer in an expanded 32-team version in the United States. Historically, the Intercontinental Cup recognised the world's best club, but that sense of significance was lacking on December 18 in Lusail, Qatar, where the champions of Europe ran out comfortable winners against the CONCACAF champions.

With the FIFA Club World Cup on the horizon, the tournament was devalued and its winner was all too predictable. Pachuca were no match for a star-

Runners-up...Mexico's Pachuca defeated Al Ahly of Egypt and Brazil's Botafogo on the way to the final

FIFA Intercontinental Cup...Luka Modric lifts the trophy with his Real Madrid team-mates

studded Madrid, even if the Mexicans began brightly and offered pockets of resistance through veteran striker Salomon Rondon in the second half. In the previous rounds, they had kept clean sheets against South American champions Botafogo and African champions Al Ahly.

Starting their campaign in Doha on December 11, the CONCACAF champions stunned Botafogo 3-0. The Brazilians, playing in their 75th match of the year, were out on their knees and coach Artur Jorge invoked the hectic calendar as the reason for his side's capitulation.

Three days later, in the next round, Pachuca dismissed Al Ahly on penalties after a goalless stalemate – despite the talismanic Rondon and Borja Baston missing their first two spot-kicks.

But when it came to the final, the gap between the 16th best side in Mexico based on this season's Liga MX Apertua table and the European champions was simply too great.

In the 37th minute, Kylian Mbappe opened the scoring following a neat attack down the left wing, and Rodrygo doubled Madrid's advantage in the 53rd minute with a strike from the edge of the box. In the closing minutes, Vinicius Junior sealed the victory with a third from the penalty spot after Oussama Idrissi had clipped Lucas Vazquez in the box. It was Madrid's fifth title of 2024 following triumphs in the Champions League, La Liga, Spanish Super Cup and European Super Cup.

Madrid enjoyed a good sojourn in the Qatari capital. On the eve of the final, FIFA and its omnipresent boss Gianni Infantino crowned Vinicius Junior as the FIFA Best Player of the Year. At long last, the Brazilian had a coveted individual prize after Rodri claimed the Ballon d'Or, prompting Vinicius, in his disappointment, and his club to snub the long-standing award ceremony in Paris.

"I don't even know where to begin," said Vinicius. "It was so far away that it seemed impossible to get here.

With the FIFA Club World Cup on the horizon, the tournament was devalued and its winner was all too predictable

I was a kid who only played football barefoot on the streets of Sao Goncalo, close to poverty and crime. Getting here is something very important to me. I'm doing it for many children who think that everything is impossible and who think they can't get here."

Carlo Ancelotti, the evergreen Italian coach, who led Madrid to another Champions League triumph in June, won FIFA Best Coach of the Year. By winning the Intercontinental Cup, Ancelotti became the most decorated coach in Madrid history, with 15 trophies, surpassing Miguel Munoz, who captained the club to their first European title against Reims in 1956 and then managed the club from 1960 to 1974.

In the summer, Ancelotti can expand his trophy cabinet again. Madrid will be among the European heavyweights favoured to make a deep run in the Club World Cup. The team will take on Pachuca again – at Charlotte's Bank of America Stadium in the first round. The enlarged tournament is the brainchild of Infantino and, in his view, a part of FIFA's mission statement to make football truly global.

The Club World Cup, however, has had a bumpy ride. China withdrew as potential maiden hosts because of the coronavirus crisis. European clubs have demanded significant prize money be on offer and sponsors have been hesitant to sign up. Broadcasters remain lukewarm even after DAZN stepped in following a breakdown of negotiations between FIFA and Apple. The tech giant had reportedly offered $1 billion for the worldwide rights for the month-long World Cup-style competition.

On the field, the danger is that European clubs, given the economic realities of the game, will too often win matches at a canter. A repeat 3-0 victory for Madrid will not excite supporters, but rather devalue a competition that, just like the Intercontinental Cup, is desperate for relevance.

The Best...Vinicius Junior scored in the final after winning FIFA's annual award

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Botafogo lay 2023 demons to rest

Rio club make up for previous season's collapse by adding domestic league title to historic Copa Libertadores triumph

In 2023, Botafogo of Rio de Janeiro built up what seemed like an unassailable lead at the top of the Brazilian league table only to collapse to finish fifth and watch Palmeiras claim the title. A year later, they held their nerve.

The decisive match came three rounds from the end. Palmeiras were in pole position, but Botafogo travelled to Sao Paulo to take on their title rivals and beat them 3-1 – four days before crowning themselves Copa Libertadores champions. Then it was straight back to the grind of the league, with two more wins to round off the season with an impressive 16 games unbeaten, a six-point lead over Palmeiras and a first league crown since 1995.

Why was 2024 so different from the previous year? Because the team was much better. The 2023 side had not been constructed with a title bid in mind. Still very early in the reign of John Textor, who took over the club in 2021 when they were in the second division, 2023 was supposed to have been a year of consolidation.

This season was different. Textor dug deep into his pockets. In came winger Luiz Henrique, the star of the season, Venezuelan attacking midfielder Jefferson Savarino, goalkeeper John and Argentine central defender Alexander Barboza, the leader of the back-line. Middle of the year reinforcements included a pair of former Premier League full-backs, Vitinho and Alex Telles, Argentina's World Cup-winning playmaker Thiago Almada and centre-forward Igor Jesus – the latter an excellent illustration of why this is not just a story about money. Igor Jesus arrived as an unknown on a free transfer from Shabab Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates, debuted in July and by October was Brazil's number nine. The work of Botafogo's scouting department has been excellent – also illustrated by the choice of manager, the unheralded Portuguese coach Artur Jorge, who took over in April.

Instant impact...Portuguese coach Artur Jorge only arrived at Botafogo in April

League winners in the previous two seasons, Abel Ferreira's Palmeiras were disappointed with second place and no major silverware during the campaign. And Rio giants Flamengo were even more disappointed with third. Former Brazil coach Tite was not a success, unloved by the fanbase and facing the tough task of winning over players who he had previously rejected with the national team. Following Libertadores elimination he was replaced by Filipe Luis, the former Atletico Madrid and Chelsea left-back, who made a highly promising start by winning the lucrative domestic cup.

> Why was 2024 so different from the previous year? Because the team was much better

A club often isolated in the north east, Fortaleza's fourth-place finish – their best ever – was yet another triumph in the lengthy reign of Argentine coach Juan Pablo Vojvoda. At the other end of the country, Internacional of Porto Alegre had real grounds to celebrate finishing fifth. The region in the south suffered a flood disaster that rendered them and neighbours Gremio unable to use their stadiums. There were fears of relegation. Gremio flirted with danger but pulled away to safety, while under Roger Machado Internacional soared up the table.

Sao Paulo claimed the sixth and final automatic spot in the 2025 Copa Libertadores, while the two places in the qualifying phase went to Bahia – who saved a disappointing season on the final day – and Corinthians, who with the attacking trio of Rodrigo Garro, Yuri Alberto and Memphis Depay produced an impressive late rally from what had originally looked like being a battle against relegation.

Two of the four relegation slots were defined early. Atletico Goianiense always looked out of their depth, and Cuiaba probably regret parting ways with striker Deyverson, who moved to Atletico Mineiro. Criciuma ran out of steam, despite a strong campaign from Yannick Bolasie. And when Red Bull Bragantino saved themselves with a last day win, it meant that a giant would also go down.

It could have been Atletico Mineiro, who had disputed the final of the Libertadores eight days earlier in the middle of a late season slump. It could have been Fluminense, 2023 Libertadores champions, who had a nightmare year with goals especially hard to come by. But in the end it was Athletico Paranaense, Libertadores finalists in 2022 and often seen as one of the country's best-run clubs. Making things even worse, 2024 was their centenary year. They made an absolute hash of it, panicking and chewing up coaches on the way to a relegation that no one had predicted.

Meanwhile, Pele's old club Santos made it back up from the second tier at the first attempt, and with Ceara and Sport joining them (along with Mirassol), it means that next year's league will boast an unprecedented five clubs from the north eastern region.

Player of the Year... Botafogo forward Luiz Henrique

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Luiz Henrique (Botafogo)
Left-footed right-winger who joined from Betis and blossomed after a slow start, taking defences apart with skill, power and stamina. Forced his way into the Brazil squad, scoring off the bench in two World Cup qualifiers.

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Artur Jorge (Botafogo)
Arrived in April with little on his CV – as player or coach – other than Braga. At the time, the club were still suffering from the trauma of 2023 and in danger of group-phase elimination in the Libertadores, but Jorge quickly built a cohesive, talented team with impressive mental strength.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Estevao (Palmeiras)
Started his first senior game in mid-April and by the end of the year was playing for his country and generally being acknowledged as the country's next superstar. Dazzlingly talented left-footed right-winger who nearly ended his debut campaign as top scorer.

Wonderkid ...Estevao

Argentina

JOEL RICHARDS

Velez Sarsfield hold their nerve in final-day showdown

El Fortin defeat Huracan to seal league title, but miss out in two other cup finals

Liga Profesional champions... Velez Sarsfield

With three potential champions going into the final day of the season, Argentina's 2024 Liga Profesional produced a dramatic photo finish. Two of the candidates met head-to-head in Buenos Aires: leaders Velez Sarsfield hosting third-placed Huracan. A victory for Velez would see them crowned champions, while Huracan needed a win and for second-placed Talleres to fail to beat Newell's Old Boys at home in Cordoba. Meanwhile, a win for Talleres – who only trailed Velez on goal difference – would see them claim the title should the leaders fail to win in the capital. It made for an intriguing and tantalising end to the campaign.

Recent history between Velez and Huracan ramped up the tension in the build-up, while bad blood still festered over the controversial 2009 league decider between the two, when Velez defeated Huracan to the crown after a game decided by some controversial refereeing decisions.

Then there were questions over whether Velez had the mettle to take the title. *El Fortin* (The Fort) had retained top spot in the table for four months, but then let their rivals back into the picture with a run of just two wins from nine games. In the penultimate league match, they stumbled to their fourth defeat of the campaign, then followed that by losing in the Copa Argentina final to Central Cordoba, a team that finished the league season 22nd in a division of 28 teams.

But Velez dusted themselves off and dominated the match against Huracan, displaying the form that had seen them set the pace over the course of the season. Creative hub Claudio Aquino opened the scoring. Damian Fernandez doubled the lead before half-time and the side held on to lift the club's 11th title and first silverware since 2013.

It crowned a swift turnaround for the club that just one year ago had needed

Decisive...Damian Fernandez celebrates after scoring against title rivals Huracan

final-day salvation to avoid relegation. The experienced coach Gustavo Quinteros then took charge, returning to Argentina after a 16-year absence, having worked in Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile and the Middle East.

Velez Sarsfield may not be one of the traditional Big Five in the country, but their 1994 Libertadores and Intercontinental Cup double puts the institution in a hallowed place in Argentine football history and tradition.

Quinteros remained faithful to Velez's tradition and formidable record of bringing through young talent. Thiago Fernandez emerged this year as the pick of a talented crop, but suffered a ligament injury late in the season. Still, there were five youth system players in the starting XI against Huracan. For the coach, it was the fourth country in which he has won a title. "80 per cent of these players fought to save the club from relegation last year," said Quinteros. "The players deserved this, they had to crown a great season with a title."

With the celebrations simmering down, a week later Velez had the opportunity to add to their trophy haul in the 2024 Super Cup. They took on Estudiantes, winners of the Copa de la Liga in May but a team that had been unable to continue that form in the following months and had ended the season mid-table.

Nonetheless, Estudiantes rose to the occasion and compounded Velez disappointment of the Copa Argentina defeat, winning 3-0 with goals from Alexis Manyoma and Guido Carrillo, plus an own goal by Tomas Marchiori.

On the international front Racing Club provided the bright spot for Argentina's clubs in South American competition. While the Libertadores produced yet another all-Brazilian final, Racing reached the final of the Copa Sudamericana under coach Gustavo Costas and defeated Cruzeiro to win the club's first international title in 36 years.

That success was not enough for the club's board, who lost the presidential elections to Racing legend Diego Milito.

It crowned a swift turnaround for the club that just one year ago had needed final-day salvation to avoid relegation

League champion at the club as a player in 2001 and in 2014, Milito joins Juan Sebastian Veron at Estudiantes and Juan Roman Riquelme at Boca Juniors as former players with glittering careers in the game now as club presidents.

Milito has stated his position on the ongoing debate over the future of Argentina's clubs. "There is no place for private ownership in Argentine football," he said during the elections campaign. "I absolutely believe in non-profit civil associations." Brazilian club Botafogo winning the 2024 Copa Libertadores after heavy investment from foreign owners struck a chord with Argentina's president Javier Milei, who is pushing the debate for Argentina's clubs to change their model from sporting associations to allow investors. The AFA continues to resist the government's moves.

While that debate rumbles on, the AFA also continues to tweak the first division format. There was no relegation this season, despite the unwieldy 28-team league. Instead, the division will return to being a 30-team competition. There will be no league competition until 2026, with the AFA's clubs voting to play two cup competitions – an Apertura and Clausura – over the course of 2025.

Trofeo de Campeones... Estudiantes' Alexis Manyoma celebrates after scoring against Velez Sarsfield

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Claudio Aquino (Velez Sarsfield)
Not only the attacking fulcrum for Velez with goals and assists but also the talisman, scoring on the crucial final match day for the title and relegation salvation a year ago.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Gustavo Quinteros
(Velez Sarsfield)
After 16 years working abroad, the 59-year-old finally won a title – his 13th – in his home country. Swiftly appointed by Gremio.

Farewell title ...Gustavo Quinteros

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Thiago Fernandez
(Velez Sarsfield)
Only injury hampered a stellar campaign for the 20-year-old forward, the latest product from the Velez youth academy who displayed rare talent and audacity.

SOUTH AMERICAN LEAGUES REVIEW

	HOW THE LEAGUE WAS WON	CONTINENTAL QUALIFIERS	PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Bolivia PRIMERA DIVISION	After the shock win of little San Antonio Bulo Bulo in the play-off based Apertura, normality returned in the league based Clausura, with **Bolivar** seeing off traditional La Paz rivals The Strongest by seven points. In the overall final, Bolivar comfortably beat San Antonio 2-0.	**Libertadores:** Bolivar and San Antonio Bulo Bulo **Qualifying rounds:** The Strongest and Blooming **Sudamericana:** Aurora, Nacional Potosi, GV San Jose and Universitario de Vinto	**Ramiro Vaca** (Bolivar) Classy central midfielder who returned last year from a spell with Beerschot in Belgium. Vital to the national team and decisive to the destiny of the title, breaking down defences with rocket shots and well-placed passes.
Chile PRIMERA DIVISION	The league went to the final day, when a late Arturo Vidal goal for **Colo-Colo** secured a 1-1 draw v relegated Copiapo, good enough to claim the club's 34th title and second in three years. They took the lead with four games to go and just held off Universidad de Chile.	**Libertadores:** Colo-Colo and Universidad de Chile **Qualifying rounds:** Deportes Iquique and Nublense **Sudamericana:** Palestino, Universidad Catolica, Union Espanola and Everton	**Fernando Zampedri** (Universidad Catolica) Veteran Argentine centre-forward who has consistently excelled in five seasons with Catolica, crowning himself as the league's top scorer in each year. Did it again in 2024 in a side that only finished fifth.
Colombia PRIMERA A	The 20 teams play two separate competitions per year, both ending in play-offs. Atletico Bucaramanga were surprise Apertura winners in June, before the Clausura was won by **Atletico Nacional**, who found form at the right time and defeated Tolima 3-1 on aggregate in the final.	**Libertadores:** Atletico Bucaramanga and Atletico Nacional **Qualifying rounds:** Tolima and Santa Fe **Sudamericana:** Millonarios, Once Caldas, Junior and America de Cali	**Yeison Guzman** (Tolima) Playmaker, 26, who enjoyed the best year of his career. Previously of Envigado and Atletico Nacional, before joining Tolima in 2023. Excelled throughout the season, but will rue his missed penalty in the second leg of the final.
Ecuador SERIE A	The 16 teams play two separate league phases, with the winners meeting in a two-legged final. Just as last year, it was a battle between **LDU Quito** and Independiente del Valle. And, just as last year, LDU triumphed, winning a pulsating first leg 3-0 to take their 13th title.	**Libertadores:** LDU Quito and Independiente del Valle **Qualifying rounds:** Barcelona SC and El Nacional **Sudamericana:** Universidad Catolica, Aucas, Mushuc Runa and Orense	**Alex Arce** (LDU Quito) The Paraguayan centre-forward provided the champions with a sharp and rugged spearhead. *El Toro* was far and away the top scorer in the league with 28 goals in just 31 appearances, including two in the final to tip the balance.
Paraguay PRIMERA DIVISION	The 12 teams play two separate tournaments a year. Libertad had made it three titles in a row with the Apertura, but slumped and had to be content with the cup as **Olimpia** surged to win the Clausura, a thumping nine points ahead of a tough Guarani side.	**Libertadores:** Olimpia and Libertad **Qualifying rounds:** Cerro Porteno and Nacional **Sudamericana:** Guarani, 2 de Mayo, Sportivo Luqueno and Sportivo Ameliano	**Gaston Olveira** (Olimpia) Gutsy Uruguayan goalkeeper who managed to impose his personality on the entire pitch, coming up with big saves at decisive moments. His side not only scored more goals than anyone else in the Clausura, but also conceded fewer.
Peru LIGA 1	**Universitario** won the Apertura on goal difference then won the Clausura by one point over Alianza Lima. With the same team winning both there was no need for final play-offs, as Universitario marked their centenary with a second title in a row and 28th in total.	**Libertadores:** Universitario and Sporting Cristal **Qualifying rounds:** Melgar and Alianza Lima **Sudamericana:** Cusco, Cienciano, Atletico Grau and ADT	**Martin Perez Guedes** (Universitario) Veteran Argentine midfielder who arrived in Peru in 2021 and now at his third club there. A title winner in 2023 and 2024 and especially key to the latter, with solid footballing sense and flashes of quality.
Uruguay PRIMERA DIVISION	It was emphatically **Penarol**'s year. They won the Apertura by seven points, lost the Intermedio tournament on penalties to arch-rival Nacional but bounced back to beat them by two points in the Clausura, meaning there was no need for end of season play-offs.	**Libertadores:** Penarol and Nacional **Qualifying rounds:** Boston River and Defensor **Sudamericana:** Cerro Largo, Danubio, Racing and Wanderers	**Leonardo Fernandez** (Penarol) Left-footed playmaker who bestrode the year like a little colossus. Back from a frustrating year in Brazil with Fluminense, he was head and shoulders above everyone else, setting up the play, creating and scoring.
Venezuela PRIMERA DIVISION	In both the Apertura and Clausura, the 14 teams play a league phase followed by play-offs. The two respective winners, Carabobo and **Deportivo Tachira**, met home and away for the title. After two draws, Tachira won on penalties – their 11th title and second in a row.	**Libertadores:** Deportivo Tachira and Carabobo **Qualifying rounds:** Universidad Central and Monagas **Sudamericana:** Deportivo La Guaira, Metropolitanos, Academia Puerto Cabello and Caracas	**Maurice Cova** (Deportivo Tachira) Midfielder who started with Tachira in 2010, and returned 11 years later after a spell in Mexico. Busy, dynamic figure who wins the ball, sets up the play and attacks the penalty area. Forced his way on the fringes of the national team.

COACH OF THE YEAR

Sergio Orteman (Aurora)
As a player, the Uruguayan was a gutsy midfielder and his teams show similar characteristics. Only champions Bolivar lost fewer games in the Clausura than Aurora, who outdid expectations to finish fourth.

Bolivia debutant... Ervin Vaca

Gustavo Alvarez (Universidad de Chile)
After a good year at Huachipato in 2023, the Argentine had a brilliant season in charge of what had been an ailing giant. Won the cup, La U's first trophy since 2017, and pushed Colo-Colo all the way in the league.

Homecoming hero...Arturo Vidal

Efrain Juarez (Atletico Nacional)
Former Mexico international who made a wonderful start to his managerial career after arriving in August. Took charge of a team that had underperformed in the first half of the year and led them to the league and cup double.

Instant impact... Atletico Nacional boss Efrain Juarez

Marcelo Zuleta (El Nacional)
Nomadic Argentine coach, with experience in Central America, the Balkans and Asia, whose side beat the top two to lift the cup – their first trophy since 2006 – taking them back into the Libertadores for the first time in eight years.

Top scorer ...Alex Arce

Martin Palermo (Olimpia)
Charismatic former Argentina striker who, with his eighth club, finally won his first title as a coach - a reward for Olimpia keeping faith after a difficult start and an embarrassing Sudamericana elimination by Sportivo Ameliano.

First title... Martin Palermo

Marco Valencia (Melgar)
Stepped out of the shadow of his older brother Wilmar with a fine season at a team from Arequipa. Third in the Apertura and fourth in the Clausura, and were only bettered by the traditionally dominant teams from Lima.

Peruvian champions ...Universitario

Diego Aguirre (Penarol)
Scored the goal that brought Penarol their last Libertadores title in 1987, and took them to the semi-finals this year – falling to eventual champions Botafogo – as well as overseeing a campaign of almost unchallenged domestic domination.

Playmaker ...Leonardo Fernandez

Edgar Perez Greco (Deportivo Tachira)
Former Venezuela winger whose grandfather co-founded Tachira. Retired in 2021, and stepped up from assistant coach in the middle of the year to send the team to the title with a long unbeaten run.

Venezuelan champions...Tachira

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR

Ervin Vaca (Bolivar)
Busy little left-footed midfielder or full-back, still just 20, who had youth spells in Chile and Belgium. Came through strongly in his first complete campaign, forcing his way into the national team in the process.

Lucas Cepeda (Colo-Colo)
Played six top-flight games for Santiago Wanderers in 2021, then plucked from the second division three years later. After a slow start, the left-footed winger tipped the balance for the champions, ending the year as Chile's new big hope.

Nicolas Rodriguez (Fortaleza)
In a championship dominated by veterans, a high point was the emergence of this 20-year-old attacking midfielder. Left-footed but usually operating on the right, he has plenty of skill plus the capacity to attack space in the penalty area.

Keny Arroyo (Independiente del Valle)
A wonderful season for a teenager who started the year with one senior appearance to his name and ended it with two Ecuador caps. Strong, skilful and explosive left-footed right-winger.

Diego Leon (Cerro Porteno)
Strapping left-back who made a goalscoring debut in August and was soon linked with a move to the Premier League. Too young to move before the summer window, he will be under the microscope over the next few months.

Maxloren Castro (Sporting Cristal)
Little left-footed winger, only just turned 17, who enjoyed an exciting debut season with tight dribbling skills and impressive whipped-in crosses. So promising that he has already received a call-up to the senior international squad.

Joaquin Lavega (River Plate)
Stocky little left-winger in the Uruguayan tradition, especially dangerous because he can cut in onto his right foot. Also proficient at attacking space through the middle. Turns 20 in February and a big move is surely on the way.

Miguel Vegas (Caracas)
Tough left-footed midfielder who can win the ball and also set moves in motion with an impressive range of passing, including off his right foot. Seems to have admirable maturity, and looks set for an interesting 2025.

LIBERTADORES RECORD

For the first time since 2017, two teams made it out of the group phase. Bolivar and The Strongest are always feared opponents at the extreme altitude of La Paz, so it was encouraging to see some good performances away from home too.

Colo-Colo made the quarter-finals and, given that a Chilean club has got out of the group only three times in the last ten years, this was something to celebrate. Huachipato and Palestino also emerge with some credit for finishing third in their groups.

Colombia has under-performed massively since Atletico Nacional won the trophy in 2016. Junior had their moments – winning 3-1 away to eventual champions Botafogo – but ended up falling tamely to Chile's Colo-Colo in the second round. Another disappointment.

A rare bad year for a country that has been punching well above its weight. For only the second time in ten years, no team made it out of the group phase. It was not much better in the Sudamericana either, with no one managing to reach the quarter-finals.

A dreadful year, with no teams qualifying for the knockout rounds for the first time since 2008. Libertad went on to reach the Sudamericana quarter-finals, but by Paraguay's high standards – three Copas and five silver medals – this was very disappointing.

Dismal once more – the 11th straight year without a club in the knockout stages. The top clubs are looking a bit more competitive but, with no Peruvians in the knockout stages of the Sudamericana either, international competition was over by the middle of the year.

For the first time since 2009, two Uruguayan teams made it out of the group phase – and Penarol's elimination of Flamengo to reach the semi-finals was a highlight of the year. There was, however, very little to cheer beyond the Penarol-Nacional duo.

Could hardly have been worse. No one made it through to the knockout stages for the seventh straight year, and in the group phase of both the Libertadores and the Sudamericana there were two draws and ten defeats.

Compiled by Tim Vickery

United States

JAMES NALTON

LA Galaxy return to top spot

Major League Soccer's most famous club produces remarkable turnaround to claim the 2024 MLS Cup

The 2024 MLS Cup play-offs were a story of a team entering a new era. A team that went from being one of the worst in the league in 2023 to one that was lifting serious silverware at the end of 2024 thanks to a flurry of new signings and one of the best players in the league leading their charge.

But this team wasn't the one many expected. While Lionel Messi's Inter Miami had a similar story arc from 2023 to 2024, their success was limited to the regular season, and they were not the team crowned champions come the end of the play-offs.

Instead, a Riqui Puig-inspired LA Galaxy went from finishing second-bottom in their conference in 2023 to winning the championship in 2024.

Puig wasn't the only player who contributed to LA Galaxy's success. Indeed, after rupturing his ACL in November, the ex-Barcelona midfielder didn't even play in the final. Yet he still took plenty of the spotlight, with the cameras repeatedly panning to him in the stands and his shirt held aloft by team-mates as they celebrated goals. With more passes and touches than any other player in MLS in 2024, he has been the heartbeat of this LA Galaxy team, so going in to the final without him represented a significant challenge for his team-mates.

Their opponents in the final were New York Red Bulls, which meant that the two highest-ranked sides of the regular season, Inter Miami and Columbus Crew, as well as the Western Conference champions, LAFC, all missed out.

The regular season reviews lavished praise on both sides and rightly so. Messi was named the league's MVP

ABOVE: MLS champions... LA Galaxy captain Maya Yoshida lifts the MLS Cup

and Crew head coach Wilfried Nancy was named Coach of the Year, but the charm (and sometimes the flaw) of using play-offs to decide an end-of-season champion is that everything that came before doesn't have to matter.

Cup competitions are far more unpredictable than leagues, but even so, it was expected that Miami, who had broken the regular season points record in 2024, would reassert their dominance with a headline MLS Cup win.

The team that toppled Inter Miami was the most unlikely to do so. Atlanta United only arrived in the play-offs by the skin of their teeth having qualified for the post-season ahead of D.C. United on goal difference. They had finished 20th overall, making them the lowest-placed team to make the play-offs proper, and then needed a penalty shootout to defeat CF Montreal in the wildcard round.

Honorary trophy lift ...Riqui Puig joined his LA Galaxy team-mates for the post-match celebrations

A best-of-three first-round between the lowest-seeded team in the play-offs and the highest looked on paper like a foregone conclusion. A one-off knockout game might offer an outside chance of an upset for Atlanta, but this format (in place for round one only) would surely favour the team that finished first over the team that finished 20th.

When Miami won game one 2-1, it seemed like it would play out in this manner, but a stoppage-time winner from Atlanta's Xande Silva in game two in front of 68,455 supporters at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta planted seeds of doubt in the minds of Miami and gave confidence to the underdog.

An equally dramatic game three saw the lead change hands twice in the first half before a Messi equaliser in the second, but a leaping Bartosz Slisz headed Atlanta into the next round and into the record books, causing arguably the biggest upset in MLS play-off history.

Columbus Crew, meanwhile, were undone at the same stage by eventual finalists New York Red Bulls. The gap between the two teams was slightly less than between Atlanta and Miami, but it was just as big of an upset, especially as the Red Bulls only needed two of the three games to win the series (1-0 away and a penalty-shootout win at home) to defeat the team that had wowed spectators across North America in 2024.

As the play-offs began, Sandro Schwarz's Red Bulls looked like they had built their whole season around the post-season, ramping everything up a notch for these knockout games.

Defeating local rivals New York City FC along the way added further satisfaction amid their run, during which they also defeated an Orlando City team that had knocked out Miami's conquerors Atlanta.

Over in the West, two powerhouses remained, no doubt enjoying the turmoil unfolding in the East. Both Los Angeles teams saw an opening and the MLS Cup looked theirs for the taking.

Everything looked set for a big LA derby in the Western Conference final, but Seattle Sounders had other ideas and defeated Los Angeles FC thanks to an extra-time goal from Jordan Morris.

LA Galaxy had been the entertainers in the West thanks to the combination of creativity, skill and goalscoring in the quartet of Puig, Gabriel Pec, Dejan Joveljic and Joseph Paintsil.

Entertainment doesn't always translate to success in knockout competitions, but with LAFC, Inter Miami and Columbus Crew all out, Galaxy were clearly the best team remaining. Greg Vanney's side proved this with big wins against Colorado Rapids and Minnesota United but suffered a blow when Puig picked up his knee injuring in the 1-0 conference final win against Seattle, ruling him out of the final.

As it turned out, they managed ok without him. His replacement, Uruguayan Gaston Brugman, delivered an MVP-winning display in the final, dovetailing with Paintsil and Joveljic who each scored within the first 13 minutes. The Red Bulls pulled one back through Sean Nealis, but the result rarely looked in doubt.

A Riqui Puig-inspired LA Galaxy went from finishing second-bottom in their conference in 2023 to winning the championship in 2024

Puig joined the team for the trophy lift as captain Maya Yoshida held the MLS Cup aloft, marking the completion of LA Galaxy's remarkable turnaround.

Shock exit...Lionel Messi's Inter Miami were knocked out of the play-offs by Atlanta United

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

Hat-trick of titles for Club America

Mexican giants make history with their third consecutive Liga MX trophy

Coach of the Season...Andre Jardine of America celebrates guiding the club to a third consecutive title

Since Liga MX implemented the system of two short tournaments per year in 1996, no team had ever won three titles in a row. The short rest period between competitions and the usual parity among the league's teams made even winning two consecutive titles a rare occurrence, achieved by only three teams in over 25 years.

The main reason was the parity within the league. In Mexico, most clubs are owned by large corporations, and even the biggest teams did not usually enjoy a significant economic advantage over the rest. In fact, until recently, the three teams that had managed back-to-back championships were Pumas, the least powerful of the so-called "Big Four," and two mid-sized clubs, Leon and Atlas.

However, in recent years, the landscape of Mexican soccer has changed. The companies owning the other two Big Four teams based in Mexico City – America and Cruz Azul – and the two powerful Monterrey clubs – Tigres and Monterrey (aka *Rayados*) – began investing far more than the rest of the league's teams. What used to be a sort of football democracy turned, as in the rest of the world, into a field dominated by the richest clubs.

It's no surprise then, that one of these teams became the first to achieve the feat of winning three consecutive titles. However, the way it happened surprised even the most optimistic of its fans.

America, owned by the media giant Televisa and the most popular team in the country, had dominated the Apertura 2023 and Clausura 2024 tournaments with a squad built around a mix of Mexican and South American internationals, along with the contribution of Alvaro Fidalgo, a relatively unknown Spanish playmaker who blossomed after arriving in Mexico.

However, the famous *Aguilas* didn't start the Apertura 2024 well. A mix of fatigue, injuries and underperformance by their key players nearly cost them a spot in the play-offs, which they eventually snuck into in eighth place.

Top spot was taken by their rivals Cruz Azul who, under Argentine coach Martin Anselmi, impressed the country with an offensive and spectacular playing style. They set a record for points in the regular season with 42, losing just once and boasting the tournament's best attack and defence.

> **Cruz Azul set a record for points in the regular season with 42, but when they faced America in the semi-finals, the same curse that has haunted them in recent years struck again**

But when the *Celestes* faced America in the semi-finals, the same curse that has haunted them in recent years struck again. Since 1999, Cruz Azul have not beaten their arch-rivals in the play-offs, and this time was no exception.

The first leg was a tense 0-0, but the return was a game for the ages. America capitalised on their rivals' nerves to take what seemed to be a definitive 3-1 lead after significant blunders by Cruz Azul's

Three in a row... America captain Henry Martin lifts the Liga MX trophy

defence. But with ten minutes left Gabriel Fernandez reduced the deficit and, when young Amaury Morales struck a stunning volley six minutes later, it looked as if the *Celestes* had produced one of the great miracles of Mexican football.

However, America's famous resilience surfaced once more. Shortly after the goal, following a few passes from the restart, America played a long ball into the area, where midfielder Erick Sanchez was brought down by defender Carlos Rotondi. Uruguayan international Rodrigo Aguirre converted the penalty, delivering heartbreak yet again to Cruz Azul fans. They had lost once more, in the most painful way possible.

Dramatic semi-final ...Rodrigo Aguirre celebrates his late winner v Cruz Azul

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Sergio Canales (Monterrey)
After struggling in his first year in Mexico, the Spanish midfielder finally lived up to his reputation and led *Rayados* to the final.

Standout star ...Monterrey's Sergio Canales

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Paulinho (Toluca)
The former Portugal striker made a massive impression at Toluca, winning the league's Golden Boot in his first season in Mexico.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Andre Jardine (America)
The 45-year-old Brazilian cemented his status as a legend for America by winning his third title in a row with *Las Aguilas*.

In the final, America faced another of Mexican football's new giants, Monterrey. Despite a star-studded roster featuring ex-Spain international Sergio Canales and former Spain Under-21 prospect Oliver Torres – along with several Mexican and South American internationals – the team led by Argentine head coach Martin Demichelis failed to live up to their potential during the regular season and the same happened in the final.

Against rivals more used to playing in decisive matches, and having suffered an injury to one of their stars, ex-Sevilla winger Lucas Ocampos, *Rayados* failed to impose their game and lost the first leg 2-1. America, under the instruction of their Brazilian coach Andre Jardine, played cautiously despite being at home and exploited the spaces left by their opponents.

The second leg, in Monterrey, was more of the same. *Rayados* struggled to find attacking spaces against their battle-hardened rivals, and fell behind in the 24th minute to a stunning goal from Paraguayan Richard Sanchez. It wasn't until ten minutes from the end that they equalised through a header from Johan Rojas, but it was too little, too late. America held firm and were crowned the first three-peat champions in the history of Mexican soccer's short tournaments.

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Vissel Kobe crowned J. League kings again

By winning their second league title in a row, Vissel Kobe are set to become the dominant force of Japanese football

Following their breakthrough season of 2023, 2024 was another memorable year for Vissel Kobe. The defending J. League champions confirmed they are the new giants of Japanese football by winning the 2024 league and cup double. Kobe edged Gamba Osaka 1-0 in the Emperor's Cup final in November and then clinched the J. League crown with a 3-0 win against Shonan Bellmare in front of their home supporters on the final day of the 2024 season in December.

Patient defending, swift transitions and clinical finishing again gave Kobe the edge. After a jittery start, Kobe were vying for the top spot by May. A streak of six consecutive wins from late August then placed them in the driving seat as the league turned into a three-way battle between Kobe, Sanfrecce Hiroshima and the surprise team of 2024, newly-promoted Machida Zelvia.

Hiroshima also began the season with high hopes following successive third-place finishes under German manager Michael Skibbe. Already formidable in defence, they became the first division's top scorers with 72 goals in 2024. Yuki Ohashi, their new signing from Shonan, netted 11 before his summer move to Blackburn Rovers. Mutsuki Kato, Cypriot striker Pieros Sotiriou and summer signing Tolgay Arslan from Melbourne City also scored eight or nine apiece.

Hiroshima had a good summer on the pitch too, going one better than Kobe with seven straight wins from

Japanese champions... Vissel Kobe celebrate after sealing the title

League runners-up... Sanfrecce Hiroshima were the J. League's top scorers in 2024

mid-July. Their challenge crumbled, however, in the final weeks with four defeats in their last five matches. A 3-1 loss at Gamba on the closing day eventually left them four points adrift in second place.

Machida Zelvia led from the front in their first-ever top-flight season. But, while the form of Kobe and Hiroshima surged in the summer, Machida's stuttered with only one win in eight league games from late August. Even then, their early form was such that victories close to the finish kept them in the mix until the last weekend. Machida wound up third after a 3-1 defeat to Kashima Antlers in their final game, two points behind Hiroshima and level on points with resurgent Gamba Osaka.

> Patient defending, swift transitions and clinical finishing again gave Vissel Kobe the edge

Gamba, too, were drawing the accolades by the end of the season. Coach Dani Poyatos has produced a sea change in his second year in charge that raised the club from third from bottom in 2023 to fourth in 2024 and a place in the Emperor's Cup final. Now tighter at the back and sharper in attack, the J. League's most improved team should again be a force to reckon with going forward into 2025.

Kashima Antlers, the J. League's most crowned club, were much less pleased with their conventionally respectable fifth-place finish – conventional for Kashima, who have never finished outside the top five in the eight years since their last championship triumph in 2016. But there are no prizes for being fifth and Kashima dismissed their boss Ranko Popovic with six matches still left to play of his first season.

The westward shift of the J. League's balance of power to Kobe, Hiroshima and Osaka was a big theme this season but, thanks to the promotion of Machida and Tokyo Verdy, the 2024 season was also the first when the capital city, Tokyo, had three teams in the top flight. While Machida grabbed the headlines, Verdy's return for the first time since 2008 saw them rise to sixth, one very important place above FC Tokyo. It was Verdy's first time finishing higher than FC Tokyo since the South Korea/Japan World Cup year of 2002.

The two Kanagawa giants, Kawasaki Frontale and Yokohama F. Marinos, were also locked together in mid-table. Emperor's Cup winners in 2023, Kawasaki made a bright start with a 1-0 Super Cup victory over Vissel Kobe but mostly laboured in the bottom half of the table before rising to eighth at the finish.

2022 champions Yokohama F. Marinos, ninth, initially struggled under new manager Harry Kewell, who was dismissed in July. His assistant, John Hutchinson, then steered them through the rest of the campaign. Yokohama scored often – 61 goals, the same as champions Kobe – but also conceded 62. This made 2024 another prolific year for Yokohama striker Anderson Lopes, top scorer with 24, who added a second Golden Boot to the one he shared with Kobe's Yuya Osako for 22 goals in the 2023 season.

Impressive debut... Machida Zelvia came third in their first-ever J. League campaign

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Yoshinori Muto (Vissel Kobe)
The former Newcastle United and Japan striker, now 32, has enjoyed a new lease of life at Vissel Kobe and was their top scorer this season with 13 goals.

Player of the Year...Vissel Kobe striker Yoshinori Muto

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Takayuki Yoshida (Vissel Kobe)
Yoshida turned Kobe's fortunes around by abandoning *tiki-taka* and leading them to their first ever league title in 2023. He followed that up by winning the league and cup double in 2024.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Kota Takai (Kawasaki Frontale)
In 2024, the 20-year-old centre-back played 24 league games for Frontale – scoring twice – represented Japan at the Paris Olympics and made his full senior national team debut against China in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers.

Urawa Reds, Japan's representatives at this summer's new-look Club World Cup, have also faltered since winning the 2022 Asian Champions League and were 13th this time. Influential defenders Hiroki Sakai and Alexander Scholz left in the summer (for Auckland FC and Qatari outfit Al Wakrah respectively) and Urawa's new manager for 2024, Per Mathias-Hogmo, was released in August. Maciej Skorza, who led them to that Champions League triumph, their third, returned to the helm in September but has a lot of rebuilding to do.

2024 was also a year of record attendances in the league. By late October, the J. League had already recorded its highest-ever aggregate attendance of nearly 10.5 million with only 89 per cent of matches played. The final aggregate for the season was just over 12.5 million.

In ups and downs, Jubilo Iwata, Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo and Sagan Tosu were relegated to the second tier with Shimizu S-Pulse, Yokohama FC and Fagiano Okayama promoted to J1.

Kuwait

JOHN DUERDEN

Bahrain win Arabian Gulf Cup as big guns fall short

Dragan Talajic's impressive side narrowly see off Oman in regional final but Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates stumble

Almost 60,000 fans were at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium in Kuwait City on January 4 to watch Bahrain come back in dramatic fashion to defeat Oman 2-1 and lift the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup.

Oman took an early lead and were heading for a third title in this regional eight-team tournament, but Mohamed Marhoon had other ideas.

With 12 minutes of normal time remaining, the winger sprinted down the left and was brought down in the area. He stepped up to equalise from the spot. Just moments later and the 26-year-old was racing down the same flank. This time he crossed from the by-line, and it was diverted into the net by the luckless Omani defender Mohammed Al Musalami and it was 2-1 to Bahrain. Despite 15 minutes added on at the end, they hung

on to lift the trophy for only the second time in their history.

If 2024 was a pretty good time for Bahrain then 2025 has started even better. Last year saw the team top an Asian Cup group containing South Korea before being knocked out by Japan. The third – and crucial – round of qualification for the 2026 World Cup started with a 1-0 victory in Australia. With six games down and four to go, Bahrain are just a point behind the Socceroos in the second automatic qualifying spot and in the running for a first World Cup appearance. Now, confidence is high after winning the Gulf Cup, especially having beaten Saudi Arabia and Iraq – bigger powers on paper at least – in the group stage.

The beaten finalists can also take much away from the tournament. Winning their group above Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, Oman then impressed in the semi-final against Saudi Arabia. Reduced to ten men after just 34 minutes, they still managed to take a 2-0 lead before conceding a late goal and hanging on for a 2-1 win. Unlike Bahrain, Oman have little chance of finishing in the top two in their World Cup qualification group but could still make the expanded tournament by finishing fourth.

Saudi Arabia's defeat to Oman prompted much browbeating back in Riyadh. At least the Green Falcons showed they can score – just three in six World Cup qualifiers was a worry – but the defence was leaky. An opening-game loss to Bahrain was deserved and they then needed a last-minute strike to overcome Yemen 3-2. The 3-1 win against Iraq was the only real bright spot in the tournament, especially the final 30 minutes when there was some decent football on display. That was almost forgotten, however, after the shock defeat to ten-man Oman.

The other losing semi-finalists were a bit happier. Kuwait may have been hosts, may have been record ten-time winners (though all but one of those victories came in the 20th century) but only Yemen were ranked lower. Under coach Juan Antonio Pizzi, they drew 1-1 with Oman and Qatar in the group stage and took second thanks to a 2-1 comeback win over the UAE.

For Qatar and the UAE, it was a dismal tournament, as neither won a game. Qatar started 2024 by lifting the Asian Cup on home soil for the second successive time yet ended it by finishing bottom of Group A of the Arabian Gulf Cup.

Arabian Gulf Cup winners...Bahrain lift the trophy

It was not what was expected of the reigning Asian champions. The man that oversaw that success, "Tintin" Marquez Lopez, had already been fired as coach due to poor form and results in World Cup qualification. He was replaced by fellow Spaniard Luis Garcia, a former coach of Espanyol (not the ex-Liverpool, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid star), but there was no new manager bounce with a defeat to Oman and 1-1 draws with the UAE and Kuwait. Even Asian Footballer of the Year Akram Afif couldn't improve their fortunes.

> **If 2024 was a pretty good time for Bahrain then 2025 has started even better**

UAE finished third with the same points, although coach Paulo Bento is still in a better position after better results in the World Cup qualifiers.

Iraq will be similarly disappointed in Group B. They had a solid 2024 under coach Jesus Casas and are sitting in the second of the automatic places in their World Cup group, but the Spaniard is under pressure after deserved defeats against Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Only Yemen did not have the World Cup to worry about and seemed all the better for it, enjoying their best-ever tournament. After taking a 2-0 lead against Saudi Arabia, it seemed as if the mighty Green Falcons were there for the taking but, perhaps surprised by their superiority, Yemen did not take advantage and ended up losing to a 93rd-minute strike.

Still, they won their first-ever game in the tournament, 2-1 against Bahrain. In the end, Yemen were the only team to stop Bahrain from winning. Nobody would have predicted that at the start.

Opening goal...Abdulrahman Al Mushaifri wheels off in celebration after scoring for Oman in the final

Decisive...Oman defender Mohammed Al Musalami watches on after scoring an own goal in the final

Southeast Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Vietnam back on top in Southeast Asia

Golden Stars bounce back from disappointing 2024 to win regional ASEAN Championship

Key man...Brazil-born forward Nguyen Xuan Son was the competition's top scorer with seven goals

If revenge is a dish best served cold, then Vietnam waited two years to get back at Thailand, beating their regional rivals 5-3 on aggregate in the final of the 2024 ASEAN Championship on January 5. There was excitement until the end of Southeast Asia's biennial ten-team bash, as the Golden Stars tasted success for the third time.

Their last win came in 2018 under South Korean coach Park Hang-seo. Now, his compatriot Kim Sang-sik is the toast of Hanoi and Saigon just eight months after his appointment, with hundreds of thousands of fans celebrating on the streets. After a disappointing 2024 for Vietnam, who crashed out in the group stage of the Asian Cup in January and then failed to reach the third round of qualification for the 2026 World Cup, it was a welcome step in the right direction.

There is no doubt as to who got the headlines: Nguyen Xuan Son made his debut on December 21 and then scored seven goals in five games. Formerly known as Rafaelson, the Brazil-born forward, who played in Japan and Denmark before heading to Vietnam and becoming naturalised in September, made the difference when it counted. Southeast Asian defences simply struggled to cope.

Fuelled by such firepower, the Golden Stars sailed through the group stage, winning three and drawing one (two games played at home and two away) to take first. With Laos finishing fifth and bottom, it was left to the Philippines, Myanmar and Indonesia to fight it out for that second spot that brought a place in the semi-finals.

It went to the Philippines, thanks to a 1-0 win over Indonesia in the final group game. The losers, who struggled in front of goal, were without many of their usual, naturalised European-based starters. Team Garuda are the only team from the region still going in World Cup qualification and have a chance of making it to North America in 2026 but, despite their unprecedented results, head coach Shin Tae-yong (another South Korean, appointed in 2020) was dismissed in early January. The pressure will be on his shock

> There is no doubt as to who got the headlines: Nguyen Xuan Son made his debut on December 21 and then scored seven goals in five games

Champions... Vietnam's South Korean coach Kim Sang-sik lifts the cup

replacement, Dutch legend Patrick Kluivert, to keep up the progress.

In Group A, it was all Thailand as they won all four matches. While some Southeast Asian nations have gone for South Korean coaches, others have turned Japanese. Thailand coach Masatada Ishii took first and Tsutomu Ogura led Singapore into second for only the second time since 2012.

There wasn't much fluidity on display from Singapore but plenty of grit and effort, epitomised by a goalless draw with neighbours Malaysia in the final game in Kuala Lumpur that was enough to clinch the semi-final spot. It was a poor tournament for the Malaysians who picked up one win, a tight 3-2 over Timor-Leste. The departure of their Korean boss Kim Pan-gon in the summer meant that assistant Pau Marti stepped up temporarily, but as soon as the tournament ended the Australian coach, and former Ange Postecoglou assistant, Peter Cklamovski took over.

As the semi-finals kicked off, all eyes were on whether Singapore or the Philippines could shock the big two and make it to the final. Singapore held Vietnam for 100 minutes at home in the first leg but then conceded two goals very late in added time. The Lions were never going to come back from that deficit in Vietnam and so it proved as they headed north to lose 3-1. It could be a last hurrah for a number of veterans, and there is now a need for younger talent to step forward.

The Philippines came closer. Helped by integrating overseas-born stars, the Azkals had gone from being the region's whipping boys to bursting onto the scene in 2010 and this was their fifth semi-final. When Kike Linares scored in the 95th minute to give them a 2-1 win over Thailand in Manila in the first leg, hopes were high that the Philippines could go to Bangkok and get that first-ever final spot. Thailand went 2-0 up but Bjorn Martin Kristensen scored late to take the tie into extra-time when Suphanat Mueanta scored to make it 4-3 on aggregate for the hosts.

It meant that the two favourites were in the final in a repeat of 2022, though the result was different. Nguyen Xuan Son scored twice in the first leg to put Vietnam in a great position, but when Chalermsak Aukkee pulled one back late on, many fancied Thailand to turn it around in Bangkok. Just after the hour in the second leg it was 2-1 on the night to the home side and 3-3 on aggregate but two late goals from Vietnam, the second coming after 20 minutes of added time, won the leg, the tie and the title.

Runners-up...Thailand reached the final thanks to Buriram United forward Suphanat Mueanta

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

Second edition of Champions Cup set to begin

Road to the final of CONCACAF's premier club competition begins in February

Preview

Leading contenders ...Mexican champions America reached the 2024 semi-finals

The clubs of North America, Central America and the Caribbean are all set for the 2025 Champions Cup, where a diverse array of teams from the Canadian Rockies to the Caribbean Sea will compete to be crowned champions of CONCACAF.

Mexican side Pachuca defeated Columbus Crew 3-0 in last year's final – the first in an expanded format with a new name: Champions Cup instead of Champions League – but the holders will not be present in 2025 to defend their crown having dropped off in Liga MX and failed to qualify.

The Crew, meanwhile, claimed the 2024 Leagues Cup, giving Wilfried Nancy's stylish team a bye to the last 16.

Four other teams join the Crew with byes to the round of 16, including 2024 MLS Cup champions LA Galaxy, who are one of the few MLS sides with previous success in this tournament, having won the shorter-format version in 2000.

The Galaxy's potent quartet of Riqui Puig, Gabriel Pec, Joseph Paintsil and Dejan Joveljic will be looking to take their attacking displays onto the international stage and show they can compete with the region's best under head coach Greg Vanney.

The only MLS team to win CONCACAF's premier competition since that Galaxy triumph in 2000 was Seattle Sounders in 2022. The Sounders can be knockout specialists and scraped into the 2025 tournament due to LAFC, LA Galaxy and Columbus qualifying via other routes, meaning that a seventh-place finish in the league standings was enough to qualify.

As was the case in 2024, nine MLS teams secured qualification, three more than the next-most represented league, Mexico's Liga MX. All of which makes for a couple of uninspiring all-MLS first-round matches, but there is plenty of interest in other parts of the draw.

Vancouver Whitecaps are the sole Canadian MLS representatives having qualified via Canada's domestic cup, the Canadian Championship, and they will face Saprissa of Costa Rica in an intriguing match-up. The Caps'

presence means standout Scottish MLS stars Ryan Gauld and Stuart Armstrong will be playing continental football in 2025.

Canada's other representatives come from the Canadian Premier League: play-off champions Cavalry FC and regular season Shield winners Forge FC, who both each face Mexican opponents.

Forge meet Monterrey and will be wary of experienced Spanish attacker Sergio Canales who turns 34 this year but is enjoying the best goalscoring form of his career, while Cavalry were drawn against Pumas UNAM.

Due to expected wintry weather conditions at their usual home just south of Calgary, Cavalry will cross the Canadian Rockies to play their home game at the Starlight Stadium on Vancouver Island.

Pumas have Club America to thank for their qualification as the latter's double triumph in the Liga MX Apertura and Clausura meant an extra spot opened up via the aggregate league table.

Other Mexican teams qualifying via this route were Chivas Guadalajara and Monterrey, who will be joined in the first round by Tigres UANL and Cruz Azul. Club America's success means they will be among the favourites and gives them a bye to the last 16.

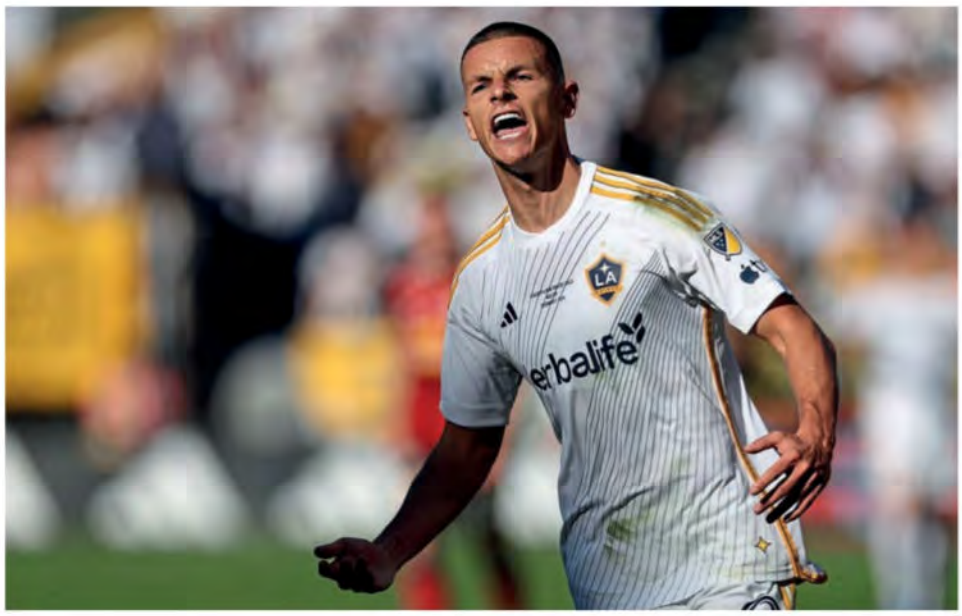
Teams from CONCACAF's southern regions qualified via the Central American Cup and the Caribbean Cup, and the winners of these regional competitions also head straight to the round of 16.

Perhaps the most eye-catching possibility is a match-up between Caribbean Cup winners Cavalier of Jamaica and Inter Miami – if the latter are able to defeat Sporting Kansas City in round one.

Cavalier's Surinamese striker Shaquille Stein scored eight goals in eight games to top the Caribbean Cup scoring charts and will be well worth looking out for. His team could get the dream draw against Messi and Co. who will be among the favourites simply because they have the Argentine great in their ranks.

The Central American Cup was won by Alajuelense for the second year in a row and the 1986 and 2004 CONCACAF champions are joined from Costa Rica by Herediano and Saprissa.

Saprissa are the team with the most previous appearances going into this tournament and their three wins in 1993, 1995 and 2005 make them the most successful non-Mexican team. Their game against Vancouver should be an early-tournament highlight.



Potent attack... Dejan Joveljic will lead the line for MLS champions LA Galaxy

Herediano will be on the to-watch list of many scouts this year thanks to their promising 19-year-old winger Andy Rojas. The teenager has attracted European interest and his rising profile will be one of the tournament's draws in 2025. Their opening game pits them against Real Salt Lake who themselves boast an American wonderkid, the 21-year-old Diego Luna, making this match-up one to watch.

> As was the case in 2024, nine MLS teams secured qualification, three more than the next-most represented league, Mexico's Liga MX

The other Central American qualifiers are Central American Cup runners-up Real Esteli of Nicaragua, Guatemalan side Antigua, and play-off winners Motagua from Honduras.

It's a good year of football for the island of Hispaniola as both Haiti and the Dominican Republic will be present at this summer's Gold Cup tournament and have representatives in the Champions Cup.

Cibao, from Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic (more on page 92), and the surprise packages Real Hope, from the Haitian coastal town of Cap-Haitien, qualified as runners-up and third-place in the Caribbean Cup respectively. It will be a tough ask for them to get past their respective Mexican opponents Chivas and Cruz Azul, but there is always the potential for upsets in the early rounds of this vibrant tournament.

One to watch...Real Salt Lake attacking midfielder Diego Luna

THE DRAW

FIRST ROUND

- Colorado Rapids v Los Angeles FC
- Sporting Kansas City v Inter Miami
- Forge FC v Monterrey
- Saprissa v Vancouver Whitecaps
- Cavalry FC v Pumas UNAM
- Cibao v Guadalajara
- Real Hope v Cruz Azul
- Antigua v Seattle Sounders
- Real Esteli v Tigres UANL
- Motagua v FC Cincinnati
- Herediano v Real Salt Lake

BYE TO LAST 16

- Columbus Crew
- Cavalier
- Alajuelense
- Club America
- LA Galaxy

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Organisational uncertainty surrounds African Nations Championship

Problems with scheduling, withdrawals and hosting casts doubts over future of tournament for African-based players

It was only in September that the Confederation of African Football (CAF) confirmed the dates for this year's African Nations Championship (CHAN), to be co-hosted by Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and everything since has been a mad scramble to try and get ready.

The CHAN tournament is for quasi-national teams made up of home-based players only and designed to offer more opportunity to the smaller nations around the continent.

Yet with few or no marquee players to draw in a big television audience, the lack of commercial value meant that it had been facing the chop. Many argue that it is also wrong that its results are considered full internationals, and count towards the FIFA rankings, when there are restrictions on who can or cannot play, but this was pushed through when former CAF president Issa Hayatou held sway at world football's governing body.

Despite some scepticism over CHAN continuing, current CAF president Patrice Motsepe has been persuaded there is still some benefit to the tournament, particularly as it may help speed up the infrastructure plans in the three East African host nations. This was further reflected in the increase in prize money: "We have significantly increased the prize money of the winner to $3.5m, which is an increase of 75 per cent," said Motsepe. "We have also increased the total prize money to $10.4m, which is a 32 per cent increase."

Holders... Senegal won the last CHAN two years ago

Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are set to host the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations finals in a first for the region, which traditionally trails behind the rest in footballing matters. But there is much scepticism about whether they will be ready. Kenya, in particular, are behind in fixing their stadia and building new venues, prompting Motsepe to make a pre-Christmas visit to Nairobi to cajole the government into quicker action.

The CHAN qualifiers were only drawn in October with significantly fewer of the larger nations entering. Egypt have consistently not participated as the tournament adds to the strain

Co-hosts...Kenya will stage the CHAN tournament alongside Tanzania and Uganda in preparation for AFCON 2027

Despite some scepticism over CHAN continuing, CAF president Patrice Motsepe has been persuaded there is still some benefit to the tournament

on an already overcrowded calendar, and now Algeria, South Africa and Tunisia have come around to the same thinking after all opting out.

The preliminaries and finals fall outside FIFA's international window. Therefore, South African clubs refused to let their players compete in previous qualifying tournaments, leaving the country to put out a so-called national side that was a motley selection of players surplus to club requirements or out of contract, cajoled together at the last moment.

There were 40 entrants, however, for the quick-fire qualifying process, which concluded on the weekend after Christmas with 19 teams to play in the finals taking place from February 1-28. However, by the turn of the year there were no details of the venues nor even a playing schedule ahead of the draw, which took place on January 15.

Qualification was based on Africa's regional zones and with three co-hosts there was only one other place for East Africa, taken by Sudan. Given their displays in the 2025 AFCON qualifiers, where they eliminated Ghana, and how well Al Hilal did in the early stages of the Champions League group phase, and that their CHAN side is almost identical to their usual national team, they will be among the favourites.

Rwanda can count themselves unlucky after defeating South Sudan on away goals. Yet with two wildcard places still to be awarded at the time of writing, they may yet get a reprieve.

Of the five previous CHAN winners, DR Congo, Morocco and defending champions Senegal will participate in this year's finals but Libya and Tunisia did not take part. Meanwhile, AFCON champions Ivory Coast lost out on penalties in their qualifier against neighbours Burkina Faso.

The Stallions were 2-0 behind after the first leg in Abidjan and because of their stadium ban had to host the return leg in Bamako, Mali. But there they won 2-0 with goals from Aboubacar Traore and Franck Kante before taking the subsequent penalty shootout 4-2.

Co-host Kenya will be participating for the first time as will the Central African Republic, who had an upset away win over Cameroon in Bafoussam in their qualifier with a late winner from Bertillon Yangana ensuring progress on the away goals rule.

It was another blow to embattled Cameroon federation president Samuel Eto'o, whose tenure has been clouded in controversy and with poor playing returns.

Mauritania had surprise success over Mali while Nigeria beat neighbours Ghana to qualify for the first time since 2018.

They won the second leg 3-1 in Uyo with Daniel Ogunmodede in charge. He is also the coach of Nigerian league leaders Remo Stars and has worked on the coaching staff with the Super Eagles.

The rioting in Mozambique that followed the contested election results in December saw them pull out of their qualifier against Zambia, who advanced to the finals without kicking a ball.

Embattled... Cameroonian federation president Samuel Eto'o

CONFIRMED TEAMS*

- Angola
- Burkina Faso
- Central African Republic
- Congo
- DR Congo
- Guinea
- Kenya
- Madagascar
- Mauritania
- Morocco
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Senegal
- Sudan
- Tanzania
- Uganda
- Zambia

*17 teams confirmed at time of writing

Venezuela

TIM VICKERY

Preview

South America's young talents head for Venezuela

The 2025 South American Under-20 Championship kicks off in January, with a host of exciting wonderkids set to take part

In the mid-1990s, Jose Pekerman took charge of Argentina's Under-20 team, and football at this level in South America took on an increased importance. In the Pekerman project, the local FA began to assume a leading role in identifying and developing promising youngsters, both as players and as human beings. As a result, Argentina went on to become Under-20 world champions in 1995, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2007, producing a conveyor belt of talent for the senior squad – most notably a certain Lionel Messi.

A decade after Pekerman began his work, Oscar Washington Tabarez took it even further with Uruguay. On the basis that good youngsters would inevitably move abroad early, Uruguay's Under-20s were used to identify players good enough to thrive at the highest level and then give them an intensive course in the tradition and importance of the sky blue shirt. Uruguay's return to football's top table has been almost entirely built around graduates from their Under-20 team, and they are current world champions at the level.

Chile's period of unprecedented success relied heavily on the Under-20 side that came third in the 2007 World Cup. Ecuador also came third in 2019 and, spearheaded by the remarkable Independiente del Valle club, have become increasingly proficient both at this and senior levels. And Venezuela's hopes of making it to their first-ever senior World Cup are based strongly on members of the squad that reached the Under-20 final in 2017.

Venezuela have been preparing diligently for the next version of the South American Under-20 Championship, which take place from January 23 to February 16. They have been using FIFA dates to have a look at youngsters from the diaspora, and there is much curiosity

South America's finest...Brazil just pipped Uruguay to the crown in 2023

Hosts' starlet... David Martinez represented Venezuela at the 2023 edition

about the foreign-based youngsters, including Cruz Azul's attacking right-back Javier Suarez, who has been snatched from Mexico. They received an extra boost in mid-November when the finals were suddenly taken away from Peru – as also happened with the Under-17 World Cups of 2019 and 2023 – and switched to Venezuela.

In this last-minute organisation, it appears that the group stages will take place in Barquisimeto and Valencia, with the top six (three from each group) going through to the final phase in Caracas and Puerto La Cruz. At stake are four places at the Under-20 World Cup in September and October to be held in Chile, who qualify automatically as hosts, meaning that South America will have five representatives at the 24-team tournament.

A new venue for the qualifying tournament meant a new draw – and one of the two groups looks ominously strong.

Venezuela's group can be classed as "interesting". Uruguay, who have recalled coach Fabian Coito for his second spell in charge, should also be strong. Paraguay, under ex-Argentina midfielder and one time Pekerman graduate Aldo Duscher, will be interesting. After a dreadful decade of youth work, Chile under former international midfielder Nicolas Cordova will hope to prepare a side able to hold its own in the World Cup. And Peru, under Jose del Solar, the much capped midfielder who also coached the senior national side, have invested heavily in this generation but have suffered the blow of losing home advantage.

Venezuela have been preparing diligently for the next version of the South American Under-20 championship, which take place from January 23 to February 16

The other group, meanwhile, looks downright intimidating. It is worth sparing a thought for Bolivia, who face the prospect of four very tough matches.

Brazil have been a mixed bag at this level, sometimes world champions, other times failing to qualify for the World Cup. Their methods have been haphazard, relying more on quantity of talent than on planning. But things have changed. Coach Ramon Menezes led the team to success in the last iteration of this competition in 2023, but then disappointed at the Under-20 World Cup with a quarter-final exit to Israel, so he is under pressure here.

Argentina have just lost coach Javier Mascherano to Inter Miami, with former international defender Diego Placente stepping up. He has plenty of raw material to work with: midfielders Franco Mastantuono and Milton Delgado, left-back Julio Soler and possibly the Manchester City-bound forward Claudio Echeverri.

Colombia can be relied upon to be strong – although goals have proved hard to come by of late in their junior sides.

And then there is Ecuador, where coach Miguel Bravo should be able to call on Chelsea-bound prospect Kendry Paez and this year's sensation Keny Arroyo, plus highly-rated striker Allen Obando. Ecuador's senior side are crying out for a centre-forward, and Obando has already been blooded in friendlies. He will fall under the microscope in January and February, with his compatriots hoping that he will live up to his billing as the coming man.

One to watch... Manchester City-bound Claudio Echeverri

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Chile
- Paraguay
- Peru
- Uruguay
- Venezuela

GROUP B

- Argentina
- Bolivia
- Brazil
- Colombia
- Ecuador

Dominican Republic

STEVE MENARY

Cibao lead rise of the Dominican Republic

Eleven years on from the professionalisation of football on the island, the Dominican champions set the standards

After a seven-year absence, Dominican champions Cibao will return to the top tier of CONCACAF club competition when they face Mexican giants Chivas Guadalajara in the first round of the Champions Cup in February.

Drawn against the 12-time champions of Mexico, it is difficult to imagine tougher opponents. And even if Cibao do manage to overcome Chivas, their arch-rivals Club America, another Mexican giant, lies in wait in round two. But simply being at the top table is a sign of progress.

Cibao were the first club from the Dominican Republic to appear in the competition in 2018 after winning the previous year's Caribbean Club Championship. Then, they also faced Guadalajara in the first round and were beaten 7-0 on aggregate before being superseded on the international front by domestic rivals Atletico Pantoja.

Atletico Pantoja went on to make two appearances, losing 5-0 on aggregate to New York Red Bulls in 2019 and losing 6-1 to Mexico's Monterrey two years later. Since then, Cibao have exerted an iron grip on the domestic Liga Dominicana de Futbol (LDF), winning four successive titles under Haitian coach Scheldeur Sainvilus, who has been at the club in one capacity or another since the club's formation by local tycoon Manuel Estrella.

Setting the standards...Cibao won their fourth league title in a row in 2024

Estrella, whose business interests range from construction to the media, including the island's *El Caribe* newspaper and the *CDN* radio and television stations, has also been central to club football going full-time in 2014.

Rematch...Cibao were comfortably beaten by Mexico's Chivas in their last meeting in 2018

Cibao started the following year with Estrella building a new stadium for the club at his alma mater, Pontifical Catholic University Madre y Maestra in Santiago, and has bankrolled the club's success.

Agent Juan Carlos Ramirez-Gaston, who works in the Dominican Republic, says: "The league is very well organised and each year the quality improves, but Cibao are the most professional club. Everyone in the Dominican Republic wants to become like them and reach that level."

Cibao attract the biggest crowds – up to 4,000 for some games – and pay decent wages, which combined with the club's increasing international profile persuaded former Colombia Under-20 international striker Rivaldo Correa to leave Peruvian side Comerciantes in 2023.

Across the LDF, players can earn anywhere from $500 a month for the handful of local players who remain part-time up to $4,000 for big stars. "Good players can earn $3,000 a month and the average is probably $2,000," adds Ramirez-Gaston.

LDF rules restrict clubs to five foreigners on the pitch at any one time, but decent wages have attracted other players from across the Caribbean and parts of South America including Argentina, Peru and Uruguay.

A decade after taking the brave step into into full-time, the club game is on the verge of making a real impact. Both representatives in the 2024 CONCACAF Caribbean Cup, Cibao and Moca, made the semi-finals. In the second-tier CFU Club Shield, the sole entrant, Atletico Pantoja, reached the same stage. Ultimately, only Cibao reached a final, losing to Jamaica's Cavalier on away goals.

"The difference [was] mainly their experience and the fact that they've got a lot of European players in their league," says Sainvilus. "Jamaica's league has been around a lot longer than ours – we're only ten years old – and that extra time to develop really shows. But we're catching up fast."

> "Cibao are the most professional club. Everyone in the Dominican Republic wants to become like them"

Before the CONCACAF Champions Cup commences, Sainvilus is looking to strengthen his squad: "We're bringing in some fresh young blood – fast, strong players who can really compete at the Caribbean level. We're hoping to make a serious run for it. It's going to be a tough fight, but we're ready to give it our all."

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations

Picturesque...FC Balzers' home ground

UNFASHIONABLE MICRO-STATE MINNOWS BECOME CULT CLUB IN LATIN AMERICA

At the turn of the year, Argentine football influencer Valen Scarsini told his hundreds of thousands of followers on social media that he wanted to transform the fortunes of the club with the smallest fanbase in world football. He settled on FC Balzers, an amateur club in double-landlocked micro-state Liechtenstein that plays in the Swiss fifth division. The village team immediately shot from a modest 1,000 Instagram followers to over 400,000 – ten times Liechtenstein's population – in the space of just a week and overtook both Basel and Young Boys to become the most followed club in Switzerland's football pyramid in the process.

Marketing director Sandro Wolfinger, who is also the club captain and a full Liechtenstein international, has been inundated with merchandise and trial requests from Latin America, and has even received an invitation from a top-flight Mexican club to play a friendly. Indeed, Balzers-mania has now gathered such momentum that Scarsini is on his way from Argentina (via Brazil, England and Switzerland) to visit the sleepy village on the micro-state's southern border and its picturesque ground. Sadly, he won't be able to see a game due to the four-month winter break – but hopes he can help the club to one million Instagram followers before the fanfare subsides.

GEORGIAN CUP THROWS UP ANOTHER UNDERDOG TRIUMPH

The Georgian Cup has produced some fairy-tale stories in recent years, with second-tier Gagra claiming the trophy in 2020 and the fourth-tier reserve team of Lokomotiv Tbilisi reaching the final in 2022. This time around, it was Spaeri's turn to make headlines. Founded by employees of a government agency eight years ago, Spaeri have since risen from the fifth tier to the second division and went close to reaching the top flight in 2022 and 2023.

Despite a more mediocre league campaign in 2024, Spaeri put together a brilliant cup run and reached the final, where they faced national giants Dinamo Tbilisi. They looked to be down and out as the game entered its final minutes, only for midfielder Saba Gegiadze to level the scores at 2-2 and for the outsiders to subsequently win on penalties. Goalkeeper Bukhuti Putkaradze, who saved the decisive spot-kick, wasn't even a professional footballer two years ago but made the unusual jump from club employee to squad member aged 26 and can now look forward to playing European football next season.

SINGLE-FAMILY XI MAKES SOCIAL MEDIA HEADLINES

DJK Florsheim II, who play in the 12th tier of German football, went viral on social media after naming a line-up where all 11 players bore the same surname: Kurtanovic. With player-coach Haris Kurtanovic bringing his brothers Kenan and Semir on board, plus an uncle and some first and second cousins too, the squad now consists of 12 family members ranging from 18 to 50 years of age – with three more joining their ranks after the winter break.

The Kurtanovic family, which originally hails from Sandzak, a cross-border region in south-western Serbia and north-eastern Montenegro, cause plenty of confusion for opposing teams – many of whom mistake the family name on the back of every shirt for a sponsor. Despite being second in the league this season and on track for promotion, the team won't be playing in the 12th or 11th divisions next term. With the DJK Florsheim first team withdrawing from the ninth tier due to a lack of players, the Kurtanovic family are set to take their place and compete in the tenth tier in 2025-26.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

SV Stripfing v TSV Hartberg
Austrian Cup, January 31
Stripfing, a village of just 350 people, produced one of the Austrian Cup's greatest-ever upsets in October by coming from behind to beat giants Rapid Vienna 2-1 in the round of 16. Now only fellow village club Hartberg stand between them and a place in the semi-finals.

St Joseph's v Lincoln Red Imps
Gibraltar Football League, February 9
At the time of writing, both of these teams were still unbeaten in the league in 2024-25, making this possibly the last top-flight fixture in Europe between two undefeated sides.

Swift Hesperange v US Hostert
Luxembourg National Division, February 9
When Luxembourg's league resumes after the winter break, all eyes will be on 2022-23 champions Swift Hesperange. The players forfeited their last home game in December against Mondorf-les-Bains in protest at unpaid wages. Will they turn up this time around?

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Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Germany/Italy (Nations League QF winner), Slovakia, Northern Ireland, Luxembourg

Group B
Switzerland, Sweden, Slovenia, Kosovo

Group C
Portugal/Denmark (Nations League QF loser), Greece, Scotland, Belarus

Group D
France/Croatia (Nations League QF winner), Ukraine, Iceland, Azerbaijan

Group E
Spain/Netherlands (Nations League QF winner), Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria

Group F
Portugal/Denmark (Nations League QF winner), Hungary, Republic of Ireland, Armenia

Group G
Spain/Netherlands (Nations League QF loser), Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Malta

Group H
Austria, Romania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Cyprus, San Marino

Group I
Germany/Italy (Nations League QF loser), Norway, Israel, Estonia, Moldova

Group J
Belgium, Wales, North Macedonia, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein

Group K
England, Serbia, Albania, Latvia, Andorra

Group L
France/Croatia (Nations League QF loser), Czech Republic, Montenegro, Faroe Islands, Gibraltar

Qualifying commences in March 2025. The 12 group winners qualify automatically for the 2026 World Cup, with the 12 runners-up entering the play-offs alongside the four best-performing UEFA Nations League group winners/teams that don't finish in the top two places in the group stage

26TH ARABIAN GULF CUP

Group A

Dec 21 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 1 (Nasser 34)
Oman 1 (Al Sabhi 42)

Dec 21 – Sulaibikhat
United Arab Emirates 1 (Al Ghassani 45+1)
Qatar 1 (Afif 17 pen)

Dec 24 – Sulaibikhat
Oman 2 (Al Sabhi 20 pen, 52)
Qatar 1 (Almoez 2)

Dec 24 – Kuwait City
United Arab Emirates 1 (Caio 5)
Kuwait 2 (Daham 16, M. Al Enezi 89)

Dec 27 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 1 (Daham 74)
Qatar 1 (Muntari 90+11)

Dec 27 – Sulaibikhat
United Arab Emirates 1 (Al Ghassani 20)
Oman 1 (Al Mushaifri 79)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Oman (Q)	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Kuwait (Q)	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
UAE	3	0	2	1	3	4	2
Qatar	3	0	2	1	3	4	2

Group B

Dec 22 – Sulaibikhat
Iraq 1 (Hussein 64)
Yemen 0

Dec 22 – Kuwait City
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Juwayr 73, Al Shehri 86 pen)
Bahrain 3 (Abduljabbar 19, Al Humaidan 38, Marhoon 76)

Dec 25 – Kuwait City
Bahrain 2 (Madan 38, 47)
Iraq 0

Dec 25 – Sulaibikhat
Yemen 2 (Al Zubaidi 8, Sabarah 27)
Saudi Arabia 3 (Kanno 30, Al Juwayr 57 pen, Al Hamdan 90+3)

Dec 28 – Kuwait City
Iraq 1 (Ali 64)
Saudi Arabia 3 (S. Al Dawsari 57 pen, Al Hamdan 81, 86)

Dec 28 – Sulaibikhat
Bahrain 1 (Al Romaihi 62)
Yemen 2 (Al Khatal 41 og, Al Zubaidi 88)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bahrain (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Saudi Arabia (Q)	3	2	0	1	8	6	6
Iraq	3	1	0	2	2	5	3
Yemen	3	1	0	2	4	5	3

Semi-Finals

Dec 31 – Sulaibikhat
Oman 2 (A. Al Alawi 74, Al Busaidi 85)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Kanno 87)

Dec 31 – Kuwait City
Bahrain 1 (Marhoon 75)
Kuwait 0

Final

Jan 4 – Kuwait City
Oman 1 (Al Mushaifri 17)
Bahrain 2 (Marhoon 78 pen, Al Musalami 80 og)
Oman: Al Rusheidi (Al Shukaili 90+9) – Al Rushaidi, Al Khamisi (Al Sinaidi 58), Al Musalami, Al Busaidi; Al Alawi, Al Saadi; Al Yahmadi, Fawaz (Al Aghbari 86), Al Mushaifri; Al Sabhi.
Bahrain: Lutfallah – Al Shamsan, Benaddi, Al Hayam, Al Khalasi; Dhiya, Al Aswad; Madan, Marhoon, Al Humaidan; Al Romaihi (Abdullatif Hassan 90+14).

2024 ASEAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Group A

Dec 8 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 2 (Coulibaly 52, Ty 60)
Malaysia 2 (Wilkin 35, Tierney 74)

Dec 8 – Hanoi
Timor-Leste 0
Thailand 10 (Davis 4, 32, Gustavsson 17, Suphanat 28, 54, Seksan 56, 61, Teerasak 79, 90+2, Mickelson 90+3)

Dec 11 – Kallang
Singapore 2 (Faris 9, Shawal 16)
Cambodia 1 (Chanthea 59)

Dec 11 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 3 (Syafiq 37, Josue 70, 83)
Timor-Leste 2 (Xavier 45+1, Joao Pedro 45+3)

Dec 14 – Hanoi
Timor-Leste 0
Singapore 3 (Nakamura 76 pen, Shawal 83, 90)

Dec 14 – Bangkok
Thailand 1 (Gustavsson 57)
Malaysia 0

Dec 17 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 2 (Rotana 42, Soknet 79)
Timor-Leste 1 (Joao Pedro 22)

Dec 17 – Kallang
Singapore 2 (Shawal 10, Faris 34)
Thailand 4 (Gustavsson 45+3, Suphanat 52, Peeradon 90+3, Teerasak 90+15)

Dec 20 – Bangkok
Thailand 3 (Akarapong 33, 78, Chalermsak 84)
Cambodia 2 (Nieto 32, Coulibaly 90+6)

Dec 20 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 0
Singapore 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand (Q)	4	4	0	0	18	4	12
Singapore (Q)	4	2	1	1	7	5	7
Malaysia	4	1	2	1	5	5	5
Cambodia	4	1	1	2	7	8	4
Timor-Leste	4	0	0	4	3	18	0

Group B

Dec 9 – Yangon
Myanmar 0
Indonesia 1 (Zin Nyi Nyi Aung 76 og)

Dec 9 – Vientiane
Laos 1 (Bounphachan 90+5 pen)
Vietnam 4 (Hai Long 58, Tien Linh 63, Van Toan 69, Van Vi 82)

Dec 12 – Manila
Philippines 1 (Kristensen 72 pen)
Myanmar 1 (Maung Maung Lwin 25)

Dec 12 – Surakarta
Indonesia 3 (Kadek 12, Ferarri 18, 72)
Laos 3 (Phousomboun 9, Phathana 13, Peter 77)

Dec 15 – Vientiane
Laos 1 (Baldisimo 34 og)
Philippines 1 (Reyes 77)

Dec 15 – Viet Tri
Vietnam 1 (Quang Hai 77)
Indonesia 0

Dec 18 – Yangon
Myanmar 3 (Lwin Moe Aung 32, Win Naing Tun 87, 90+3)
Laos 2 (Kydavone 77, Chony 81)

Dec 18 – Manila
Philippines 1 (Gayoso 68)
Vietnam 1 (Ngoc Tan 90+7)

Dec 21 – Viet Tri
Vietnam 5 (Vi Hao 48, Xuan Son 55, 90, Quang Hai 74, Tien Linh 90+2)
Myanmar 0

Dec 21 – Surakarta
Indonesia 0
Philippines 1 (Kristensen 63 pen)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vietnam (Q)	4	3	1	0	11	2	10
Philippines (Q)	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Indonesia	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Myanmar	4	1	1	2	4	9	4
Laos	4	0	2	2	7	11	2

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Dec 26 – Kallang
Singapore 0
Vietnam 2 (Tien Linh 90+11 pen, Xuan Son 90+14)

Dec 27 – Manila
Philippines 2 (Reyes 21, Linares 90+5)
Thailand 1 (Suphanan 45)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 29 – Viet Tri
Vietnam 3 (Xuan Son 45+1 pen, 63, Tien Linh 90+3 pen)
Singapore 1 (Nakamura 74)
Vietnam win 5-1 on aggregate

Dec 30 – Bangkok
Thailand 3 (Peeradol 37, Gustavsson 54, Suphanat 116)
Philippines 1 (Kristensen 84)
After Extra-Time. Thailand win 4-3 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

Jan 2 – Viet Tri
Vietnam 2 (Xuan Son 59, 73)
Thailand 1 (Chalermsak 83)
Vietnam: Dinh Trieu – Xuan Manh, Thanh Chung, Tien Dung; Van Thanh (Duy Manh 87), Vi Hao (Quang Hai 46), Ngoc Tan, Hoang Duc (Tien Linh 90+6), Van Vi (Tien Anh 72); Xuan Son, Ngoc Quang (Hai Long 87).
Thailand: Patiwat – Suphanan, Chalermsak, Pansa, Mickelson (Thitathorn 46); Weidersjo (Supachok 61), Akarapong (Weerathep 45+2), Davis; Seksan (Suphanat 61), Gustavsson, Ekanit (Worachit 73).

Final – 2nd Leg

Jan 5 – Bangkok
Thailand 2 (Davis 28, Supachok 64)
Vietnam 3 (Tuan Hai 8, Pansa 82 og, Hai Long 90+20)
Vietnam win 5-3 on aggregate
Thailand: Patiwat – Suphanan, Khemdee, Pansa, Thitathorn (Mickelson 80); Weerathep; Suphanat, Peeradon (Worachit 90+3), Davis (Ekanit 90+3), Supachok; Gustavsson (Seksan 79).
Sent off: Weerathep 74.
Vietnam: Dinh Trieu – Xuan Manh, Thanh Chung, Tien Dung; Van Thanh, Ngoc Tan (Quang Ha 60), Hoang Duc, Van Vi (Duy Manh 60); Ngoc Quang (Hai Long 85), Xuan Son (Tien Linh 34), Tuan Hai (Thanh Binh 83).

2025 EAFF CHAMPIONSHIP

Preliminary Round

Group A

Dec 14 – Hong Kong
Macau 1 (Lei Cheng Lam 41 pen)
Guam 2 (Morimoto 31, Taitague 73)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guam (Q)	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Macau	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
North Korea*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Withdrew*

Group B

Dec 8 – Hong Kong
Mongolia 0
Hong Kong 3 (Everton 24, Wong Wai 35, Benavides 60)

Dec 11 – Hong Kong
Chinese Taipei 4 (Kouame 42, 83, Estama 59, Yu Yao-hsing 76)
Mongolia 0

Dec 14 – Hong Kong
Hong Kong 2 (Orr 19, Tsui Wang Kit 87)
Chinese Taipei 1 (Yu Yao-hsing 29)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hong Kong (Q)	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Chinese Taipei	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Mongolia	2	0	0	2	0	7	0

Final

Dec 17 – Hong Kong
Guam 0
Hong Kong 5 (Chan Siu Kwan 2, 53, Benavides 12, Everton 50, Dudu 78)

Hong Kong qualify for the final tournament – which takes place from July 7-16, 2025 – with automatic qualifiers South Korea (hosts), Japan and China

CHAN 2024 QUALIFYING

Northern Zone

Morocco qualify automatically as Algeria and Egypt did not enter, Libya and Tunisia withdrew

Western Zone A

Second Round

Dec 20-22:
Guinea 4-1 Guinea-Bissau; Liberia 1-1 Senegal; Mauritania 1-0 Mali
Dec 28-29:
Senegal 3-0 Liberia (agg 4-1); Guinea-Bissau 1-2 Guinea (agg 2-6); Mali 0-0 Mauritania (agg 0-1)

Cape Verde and Gambia did not enter, Sierra Leone eliminated in first round by Liberia

Western Zone B

Second Round

Dec 22:
Togo 1-1 Niger; Ivory Coast 2-0 Burkina Faso; Ghana 0-0 Nigeria
Dec 27-28:
Niger 0-0 Togo (agg 1-1, *Niger win on away goals*); Burkina Faso 2-0 Ivory Coast (agg 2-2, *Burkina Faso win 4-2 on pens*); Nigeria 3-1 Ghana (agg 3-1)

Benin eliminated in first round by Togo

Central Zone

Dec 21-22:
Chad 1-1 DR Congo; Equatorial Guinea 0-0 Congo; Central African Republic 0-1 Cameroon
Dec 28-29:
Cameroon 1-2 Central African Republic (agg 2-2, *Central African Republic win on away goals*); Congo 2-1 Equatorial Guinea (agg 2-1); DR Congo 3-1 Chad (agg 4-2)

Gabon and Sao Tome & Principe did not enter

Central & Eastern Zone

Second Round

Dec 22-26:
Ethiopia 0-2 Sudan; South Sudan 3-2 Rwanda; Burundi 0-1 Uganda;
Dec 25-29:
Sudan 2-1 Ethiopia (agg 4-1); Rwanda 2-1 South Sudan (agg 4-4, *Rwanda win on away goals*); Uganda 1-0 Burundi (agg 2-0)

Kenya and Tanzania (eliminated in first round by South Sudan and Sudan respectively) and Uganda qualify automatically as hosts so only the best performing nation (excluding those three countries) qualify. Eritrea and Somalia withdrew, Djibouti eliminated in first round by Rwanda

Southern Zone

Second Round

Dec 20-21:
Eswatini 0-2 Madagascar; Lesotho 0-2 Angola
Dec 28-29:
Angola 0-1 Lesotho (agg 2-1); Madagascar 0-1 Eswatini (agg 2-1); Zambia *w/o* Mozambique

Botswana, Comoros, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa and Seychelles did not enter, Namibia and Zimbabwe eliminated in first round by Lesotho and Eswatini respectively

Two wilcards teams will also qualify, but these were unconfirmed at the time of writing

FRIENDLIES

Dec 9 – Doha
Kuwait 1 (Al Awadhi 90+5)
Yemen 1 (Sabarah 86)

Dec 12 – Doha
Kuwait 1 (Bouresli 11)
Lebanon 2 (El Zein 75, Merheg 90)

Dec 15 – Doha
Kuwait 0
Lebanon 2 (Kassas 4, Khamis 41)

Dec 17 – Riyadh
Saudi Arabia 3 (Al Shehri 13 pen, Al Hamdan 53, N. Al Dawsari 88)
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Jack 90+4)

Club Football

WORLD

2024 FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

Second Round

Dec 11 – Doha
Botafogo (Bra) 0
Pachuca (Mex) 3 (Idrissi 50, Deossa 66, Rondon 80)

Play-Off

Dec 14 – Doha
Pachuca (Mex) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 0
After Extra-Time. Pachuca win 6-5 on pens

Final

Dec 18 – Lusail
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Mbappe 37, Rodrygo 53, Vinicius Junior 84 pen)
Pachuca (Mex) 0
Real Madrid: Courtois – Vazquez (Asensio 88), Tchouameni, Rudiger, Garcia; Valverde, Camavinga (Ceballos 62); Rodrygo (Modric 70), Bellingham (Guler 88), Vinicius Junior; Mbappe (Brahim 62).
Pachuca: Moreno – Rodriguez (Sanchez 75), Barreto, Micolta, B. Gonzalez; Montiel, Pedraza; Deossa (Hernandez 89), Bautista (Mena 75), Idrissi (Dominguez 88); Rondon.

EUROPE

2024-25 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 6

Dec 10 – Girona
Girona (Spa) 0
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Salah 63 pen)

Dec 10 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0
Celtic (Sco) 0

Dec 10 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (De Ketelaere 45+2 pen, Lookman 65)
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Mbappe 10, Vinicius Junior 56, Bellingham 59)

Dec 10 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Mukiele 90)
Internazionale (Ita) 0

Dec 10 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 2 (Quaresma 24 og, Nielsen 84)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Catamo 3)

Dec 10 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 3 (Ramos 30, Mendes 72, Doue 85)

Dec 10 – Gelsenkirchen
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Kevin 5)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 5 (Laimer 11, Muller 45, Olise 70 pen, 90+3, Musiala 87)

Dec 10 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig (Ger) 2 (Openda 27, Baumgartner 62)
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (McGinn 3, Duran 52, Barkley 85)

Dec 10 – Guingamp
Brest (Fra) 1 (Le Cardinal 43)
PSV (Ned) 0

Dec 11 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 3 (Alvarez 16, Griezmann 42, 57)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Strelec 51 pen)

Dec 11 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 3 (Sahraoui 37, Bakker 45+2, Haraldsson 81)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 2 (Kiteishvili 45+4, Biereth 47)

Dec 11 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 2 (Leao 42, Abraham 87)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Radonjic 67)

Dec 11 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Saka 34, 78, Havertz 88)
Monaco (Fra) 0

Dec 11 – Dortmund
B. Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Guirassy 60 pen, 78)
Barcelona (Spa) 3 (Raphinha 53, Torres 75, 85)

Dec 11 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 4 (Trauner 8, Paixao 10, Hadj Moussa 30, Gimenez 63)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 2 (Rrahmani 43, Beelen 79 og)

Dec 11 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Vlahovic 53, McKennie 75)
Manchester City (Eng) 0

Dec 11 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 0
Bologna (Ita) 0

Dec 11 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 5 (Stiller 25, Millot 53, Fuhrich 61, Vagnoman 66, Keitel 75)
Young Boys (Sui) 1 (Lakomy 6)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	6	6	0	0	13	1	18
Barcelona	6	5	0	1	21	7	15
Arsenal	6	4	1	1	11	2	13
B. Leverkusen	6	4	1	1	12	5	13
Aston Villa	6	4	1	1	9	3	13
Inter	6	4	1	1	7	1	13
Brest	6	4	1	1	10	6	13
Lille	6	4	1	1	10	7	13
B. Dortmund	6	4	0	2	18	9	12
Bayern Munich	6	4	0	2	17	8	12
Atletico Madrid	6	4	0	2	14	10	12
Milan	6	4	0	2	12	9	12
Atalanta	6	3	2	1	13	4	11
Juventus	6	3	2	1	9	5	11
Benfica	6	3	1	2	10	7	10
Monaco	6	3	1	2	12	10	10
Sporting	6	3	1	2	11	9	10
Feyenoord	6	3	1	2	14	15	10
Club Brugge	6	3	1	2	6	8	10
Real Madrid	6	3	0	3	12	11	9
Celtic	6	2	3	1	10	10	9
Man City	6	2	2	2	13	9	8
PSV	6	2	2	2	10	8	8
Dinamo Zagreb	6	2	2	2	10	15	8
PSG	6	2	1	3	6	6	7
Stuttgart	6	2	1	3	9	12	7
Shakhtar Donetsk	6	1	1	4	5	13	4
Sparta Prague	6	1	1	4	7	18	4
Sturm Graz	6	1	0	5	4	9	3
Girona	6	1	0	5	4	10	3
Red Star Belgrade	6	1	0	5	10	19	3
RB Salzburg	6	1	0	5	3	18	3
Bologna	6	0	2	4	1	7	2
RB Leipzig	6	0	0	6	6	13	0
Slovan Bratislava	6	0	0	6	5	21	0
Young Boys	6	0	0	6	3	22	0

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 6

Dec 11 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0
Athletic Club (Spa) 2 (I. Williams 5, 45)

Dec 12 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 3 (Pellegrini 10, Abdulhamid 47, Hermoso 90+1)
Braga (Por) 0

Dec 12 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Vydra 48)
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Hojlund 62, 88)

Dec 12 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 2 (Botheim 24, Pena 90+2)
Galatasaray (Tur) 2 (Jelert 43, Akgun 56)

Dec 12 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 0
Twente (Ned) 0

Dec 12 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 5 (Taison 10, Brandon 29, Chalov 76, Zivkovic 80 pen, Despodov 89)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0

Dec 12 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 2 (Chochev 60, Duah 63)
AZ (Ned) 2 (Van Bommel 13, Maikuma 19)

Dec 12 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 2 (Ivanovic 33, 90+2)
Nice (Fra) 1 (Guessand 45+1)

Dec 12 – Sinsheim
Hoffenheim (Ger) 0
FCSB (Rou) 0

Dec 12 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Taore 47)
Lazio (Ita) 3 (Tchaouna 12, Dele-Bashiru 52, Pedro 77)

Dec 12 – Porto
Porto (Por) 2 (Namaso 30, Aghehowa 56)
Midtjylland (Den) 0

Dec 12 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Zinckernagel 37, Bjortuft 43)
Besiktas (Tur) 1 (Fernandes 21)

Dec 12 – Boras
Elfsborg (Swe) 1 (Qasem 57)
Qarabag (Aze) 0

Dec 12 – Belgrade
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 2 (Nachmias 16, Stojic 69)
RFS (Lva) 1 (Savalnieks 52)

Dec 12 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 3 (Cherki 27, Fofana 50, Nuamah 54)
E. Frankfurt (Ger) 2 (Knauff 18, Marmoush 85)

Dec 12 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Igamane 47)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 1 (Kulusevski 75)

Dec 12 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 3 (Oyarzabal 19, 33, Becker 24)
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0

Dec 12 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 1 (Chory 58)
Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Angulo 8, Verschaeren 31)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lazio	6	5	1	0	14	3	16
Athletic Club	6	5	1	0	11	2	16
Anderlecht	6	4	2	0	11	6	14
Lyon	6	4	1	1	15	7	13
E. Frankfurt	6	4	1	1	12	8	13
Galatasaray	6	3	3	0	15	11	12
Man United	6	3	3	0	12	8	12
Rangers	6	3	2	1	13	7	11
Tottenham	6	3	2	1	11	7	11
FCSB	6	3	2	1	7	5	11
Ajax	6	3	1	2	14	6	10
Real Sociedad	6	3	1	2	10	6	10
Bodo/Glimt	6	3	1	2	10	9	10
Roma	6	2	3	1	8	5	9
Olympiacos	6	2	3	1	5	3	9
Ferencvaros	6	3	0	3	11	10	9
Viktoria Plzen	6	2	3	1	10	9	9
Porto	6	2	2	2	12	10	8
AZ	6	2	2	2	9	9	8
Union SG	6	2	2	2	5	5	8
Fenerbahce	6	2	2	2	7	9	8
PAOK	6	2	1	3	10	8	7
Midtjylland	6	2	1	3	5	7	7
Elfsborg	6	2	1	3	8	11	7
Braga	6	2	1	3	7	10	7
Hoffenheim	6	1	3	2	5	8	6
Maccabi Tel Aviv	6	2	0	4	7	13	6
Besiktas	6	2	0	4	6	13	6
Slavia Prague	6	1	1	4	5	7	4
Twente	6	0	4	2	4	7	4
Malmo	6	1	1	4	6	12	4
Ludogorets	6	0	3	3	3	8	3
Qarabag	6	1	0	5	4	14	3
RFS	6	0	2	4	5	12	2
Nice	6	0	2	4	6	14	2
Dynamo Kyiv	6	0	0	6	1	15	0

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 5

Dec 12 – Kopavogur
Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 1 (Sigurpalsson 72)
Djurgarden (Swe) 2 (Kosugi 62, Wikheim 65)

Dec 12 – Almaty
Astana (Kaz) 1 (Tomasov 45)
Chelsea (Eng) 3 (Guiu 14, 18, Veiga 39)

Dec 12 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 7 (Sottil 10, 58, Ikone 22, Richardson 39, Mandragora 69, Stojkovic 82 og, Gudmundsson 85 pen)
LASK (Aut) 0

Dec 12 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 2 (Chiakha 48, Diks 78 pen)
Hearts (Sco) 0

Dec 12 – Sumgayit
Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 2 (Gavrilovich 67 pen, Zherdev 73)
Larne (Nir) 0

Dec 12 – Yerevan
Noah (Arm) 1 (Aias 45+4)
APOEL (Cyp) 3 (Chebake 23, Kostadinov 89, Abagna 90+3)

Dec 12 – Chisinau
Petrocub Hincesti (And) 0
Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Bakambu 54)

Dec 12 – Helsinki
HJK (Fin) 2 (Erwin 32, Meriluoto 90+2)
Molde (Nor) 2 (Ihler 14, 27)

Dec 12 – Istanbul
Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 3 (Turuc 6, Crespo 18, Piatek 68)
Heidenheim (Ger) 1 (Honsak 61)

Dec 12 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 (Morishita 11)
Lugano (Sui) 2 (Bottani 40, Hajdari 74)

Dec 12 – Ljubljana
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 1 (Blanco 5)
Cercle Brugge (Bel) 4 (Olaigbe 2, 81, Felipe Augusto 24, Denkey 72)

Dec 12 – St Gallen
St Gallen (Sui) 1 (Csoboth 66)
Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 4 (Mendes 33, G. Silva 58, Alberto 84, Samu 90+4)

Dec 12 – Mlada Boleslav
Mlada Boleslav (Cze) 1 (Vydra 76)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0

Dec 12 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 3 (Dean 8 pen, Gandelman 13, Surdez 20)
TSC Backa Topola (Srb) 0

Dec12 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 3 (Kakoullis 52, Semedo 66, Saidou 90+6)
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Beljo 62)

Dec 12 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 2 (Dragomir 48, Correia 63)
Celje (Svn) 0

Dec 12 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 3 (Kenny 12, 64, Farrugia 56)
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 0

Dec 12 – Shrewsbury
The New Saints (Wal) 0
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Djuricic 15, Ioannidis 62 pen)

Matchday 6

Dec 19 – Heidenheim
Heidenheim (Ger) 1 (Theuerkauf 30)
St Gallen (Sui) 1 (Stanic 77)

Dec 19 – Nicosia
APOEL (Cyp) 1 (Donis 56)
Astana (Kaz) 1 (Kazukolovas 64)

Dec 19 – Brugge
Cercle Brugge (Bel) 1 (Brunner 82)
Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1 (Piatek 74)

Dec 19 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 5 (Guiu 23, 34, 45+3, Dewsbury-Hall 40, Cucurella 58)
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (Poom 26)

Dec 19 – Stockholm
Djurgarden (Swe) 3 (Nguen 24, Hummet 45+4, Aslund 76)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 (Wszolek 56)

Dec 19 – Thun
Lugano (Sui) 2 (Mahmoud 7, Bottani 33)
Pafos (Cyp) 2 (Saipi 4 og, Goldar 90+5)

Dec 19 – Banja Luka
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 0
Omonia (Cyp) 0

Dec 19 – Backa Topola
TSC Backa Topola (Srb) 4 (Stanic 41, Dakovac 74, 76, Pantovic 81)
Noah (Arm) 3 (Aias 5, 48, Ferreira 15)

Dec 19 – Edinburgh
Hearts (Sco) 2 (Wilson 64, Spittal 70)
Petrocub (And) 2 (Platica 21, Mudrac 83 pen)

Dec 19 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0

Dec 19 – Belfast
Larne (Nir) 1 (Cosgrove 74)
Gent (Bel) 0

Dec 19 – Linz
LASK (Aut) 1 (Ljubicic 26)
Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 1 (Sigurpalsson 23 pen)

Dec 19 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 4 (Ihler 27, Kral 42 og, Kaasa 64, Stenevik 90+1)
Mlada Boleslav (Cze) 3 (Suchy 5, Kusej 59, Vydra 61)

Dec 19 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 3 (Edmilson 20, 43, Zec 79)
The New Saints (Wal) 2 (Davies 19, Holden 42)

Dec 19 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 4 (Jeremejeff 33, Tete 54, 65, Ioannidis 84)
Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 0

Dec 19 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Cardoso 27)
HJK (Fin) 0

Dec 19 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 3 (Beljo 45+2, Wurmbrand 51, 64)
Copenhagen (Den) 0

Dec 19 – Guimaraes
Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 1 (G. Silva 33)
Fiorentina (Ita) 1 (Mandragora 87)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Chelsea (Q)	6	6	0	0	26	5	18
Vitoria Guimaraes (Q)	6	4	2	0	13	6	14
Fiorentina (Q)	6	4	1	1	18	7	13
Rapid Vienna (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	5	13
Djurgarden (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	7	13
Lugano (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	7	13
Legia Warsaw (Q)	6	4	0	2	13	5	12
Cercle Brugge (Q)	6	3	2	1	14	7	11
Jagiellonia Bialystok*	6	3	2	1	10	5	11
Shamrock Rovers*	6	3	2	1	12	9	11
APOEL*	6	3	2	1	8	5	11
Pafos*	6	3	1	2	11	7	10
Panathinaikos*	6	3	1	2	10	7	10
Olimpija Ljubljana*	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
Real Betis*	6	3	1	2	6	5	10
Heidenheim*	6	3	1	2	7	7	10
Gent*	6	3	0	3	8	8	9
Copenhagen*	6	2	2	2	8	9	8
Vikingur Reykjavik*	6	2	2	2	7	8	8
Borac Banja Luka*	6	2	2	2	4	7	8
Celje*	6	2	1	3	13	13	7
Omonia Nicosia*	6	2	1	3	7	7	7
Molde*	6	2	1	3	10	11	7
TSC*	6	2	1	3	10	13	7
Hearts	6	2	1	3	6	9	7
Istanbul Basaksehir	6	1	3	2	9	12	6
Mlada Boleslav	6	2	0	4	7	10	6
Astana	6	1	2	3	4	8	5
St Gallen	6	1	2	3	10	18	5
HJK	6	1	1	4	3	9	4
Noah	6	1	1	4	6	16	4
The New Saints	6	1	0	5	5	10	3
Dinamo Minsk	6	1	0	5	4	13	3
Larne	6	1	0	5	3	12	3
LASK	6	0	3	3	4	14	3
Petrocub	6	0	2	4	4	13	2

*Advance to play-off round

Play-Off Round Draw

Gent (Bel) v Real Betis (Spa); Celje (Svn) v APOEL (Cyp); TSC (Srb) v Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) v Panathinaikos (Gre); Copenhagen (Den) v Heidenheim (Ger); Molde (Nor) v Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Omonia (Cyp) v Pafos (Cyp); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) v Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn)
Two-legged ties take place on February 13 and 20

2024 ITALIAN SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Jan 2 – Riyadh
Internazionale 2 (Dumfries 49, 61)
Atalanta 0

Jan 3 – Riyadh
Juventus 1 (Yildiz 21)
Milan 2 (Pulisic 71 pen, Gatti 75 og)

Final

Jan 6 – Riyadh
Internazionale 2 (L. Martinez 45+1, Taremi 47)
Milan 3 (Hernandez 52, Pulisic 80, Abraham 90+3)

2024 FRENCH SUPER CUP

Jan 5 – Doha
Paris Saint-Germain 1 (Dembele 90+2)
Monaco 0

SOUTH AMERICA

ARGENTINA

Primera Division

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Velez Sarsfield (C)	27	14	9	4	38	16	51
Talleres	27	13	9	5	34	27	48
Racing	27	14	4	9	42	30	46
Huracan	27	12	10	5	28	18	46
River Plate	27	11	10	6	38	21	43
Boca Juniors	27	11	9	7	30	23	42
Independiente	27	9	13	5	25	17	40
Atletico Tucuman	27	11	7	9	28	27	40
Union	27	11	7	9	27	26	40
Platense	27	10	9	8	20	18	39
Independiente Rivadavia	27	10	8	9	23	25	38
Estudiantes	27	8	12	7	36	34	36
Instituto	27	10	6	11	32	31	36
Lanus	27	8	12	7	28	31	36
Godoy Cruz	27	8	11	8	31	28	35
Belgrano	27	8	11	8	33	32	35
Deportivo Riestra	27	8	11	8	26	27	35
Tigre	27	8	10	9	27	30	34
Gimnasia y Esgrima	27	8	8	11	21	23	32
Rosario Central	27	8	8	11	27	30	32
Defensa y Justicia	27	7	11	9	27	33	32
Central Cordoba	27	8	7	12	29	36	31
Argentinos Juniors	27	8	6	13	22	28	30
San Lorenzo	27	7	8	12	20	26	29
Newell's Old Boys	27	7	7	13	22	35	28
Sarmiento	27	5	11	11	18	28	26
Banfield	27	5	9	13	22	36	24
Barracas Central	27	4	11	12	15	33	23

Aggregate Table (Primera Division & Copa DLLP)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Velez Sarsfield (C)	41	21	13	7	52	29	76
Talleres	41	19	15	7	58	43	72
River Plate	41	18	16	7	64	31	70
Racing	41	21	7	13	66	41	70
Boca Juniors	41	18	13	10	50	35	67
Godoy Cruz	41	17	13	11	47	34	64
Estudiantes* (C)	41	16	15	10	55	43	63
Independiente	41	15	18	8	39	27	63
Huracan	41	16	14	11	40	30	62
Union	41	16	12	13	43	40	60
Lanus	41	15	14	12	48	45	59
Defensa y Justicia	41	14	16	11	44	46	58
Platense	41	14	15	12	30	32	57
Argentinos Juniors	41	15	11	15	47	42	56
Instituto	41	15	8	18	50	48	53
Atletico Tucuman	41	12	14	15	36	50	50
Belgrano	41	11	16	14	52	53	49
Barracas Central	41	11	16	14	35	48	49
Newell's Old Boys	41	13	10	18	35	50	49
Gimnasia y Esgrima	41	13	9	19	39	46	48
Deportivo Riestra	41	11	15	15	34	43	48
Rosario Central	41	12	11	18	37	48	47
Independiente Rivadavia	41	12	10	19	36	50	46
San Lorenzo	41	10	15	16	30	40	45
Central Cordoba	41	10	12	19	39	56	42
Banfield	41	9	14	18	36	51	41
Tigre	41	9	12	20	34	55	39
Sarmiento	41	7	14	20	27	47	35

*Won Copa de la Liga Profesional

2024 ARGENTINA SUPER CUP

Dec 21 – Santiago del Estero
Velez Sarsfield 0
Estudiantes 3 (Marchiori 24 og, Manyoma 28, Carrillo 76)

BOLIVIA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar* (C)	30	20	7	3	76	25	67
The Strongest	30	18	6	6	62	34	60
GV San Jose	30	14	6	10	62	40	48
Aurora	30	12	12	6	49	40	48
Always Ready	30	13	7	10	48	37	46
Nacional Potosi	30	13	7	10	52	47	46
Blooming	30	13	6	11	36	43	45
Jorge Wilstermann	30	11	11	8	35	30	44
Real Tomayapo	30	13	4	13	41	41	43
Independiente	30	9	9	12	48	58	36
Oriente Petrolero	30	10	5	15	44	58	35
Universitario	30	9	7	14	36	47	34
San Antonio Bulo Bulo	30	8	7	15	40	58	31
Guabira	30	8	6	16	36	53	30
Royal Pari	30	7	8	15	30	46	29
Real Santa Cruz	30	6	4	20	30	68	22

Advance to final to play Apertura winner

Final

Dec 22: San Antonio Bulo Bulo 0-2 Bolivar

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar (C)	38	25	8	5	95	38	83
The Strongest	38	23	7	8	79	49	76
Aurora	38	16	14	8	63	47	62
Nacional Potosi	38	17	9	12	65	58	60
GV San Jose	38	17	8	13	74	54	59
Blooming	38	17	8	13	48	55	59
Real Tomayapo	38	16	6	16	51	53	54
Always Ready	38	14	10	14	54	47	52
Jorge Wilstermann	38	12	13	13	47	44	49
Universitario	38	13	9	16	44	54	48
Independiente	38	12	11	15	58	69	47
San Antonio Bulo Bulo	38	12	9	17	55	65	45
Oriente Petrolero	38	13	6	19	53	71	45
Guabira	38	11	7	20	48	64	40
Royal Pari* (R)	38	9	10	19	37	56	37
Real Santa Cruz (R)	38	7	5	26	38	85	26

Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Dec 21: Royal Pari 4-0 Totora Real Oruro
Dec 23: Totora Real Oruro a-a Royal Pari
(*match abandoned with Totora Real Oruro 3-0 up*)

BRAZIL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Botafogo (C)	38	23	10	5	59	29	79
Palmeiras	38	22	7	9	60	33	73
Flamengo	38	20	10	8	61	42	70
Fortaleza	38	19	11	8	53	39	68
Internacional	38	18	11	9	53	36	65
Sao Paulo	38	17	8	13	53	43	59
Corinthians	38	15	11	12	54	45	56
Bahia	38	15	8	15	49	49	53
Cruzeiro	38	14	10	14	43	41	52
Vasco da Gama	38	14	8	16	43	56	50
Vitoria	38	13	8	17	45	52	47
Atletico Mineiro	38	11	14	13	47	54	47
Fluminense	38	12	10	16	33	39	46
Gremio	38	12	9	17	44	50	45
Juventude	38	11	12	15	48	59	45
RB Bragantino	38	10	14	14	44	48	44
Ath Paranaense (R)	38	11	9	18	40	46	42
Criciuma (R)	38	9	11	18	42	61	38
Atl Goianiense (R)	38	7	9	22	29	58	30
Cuiaba (R)	38	6	12	20	29	49	30

CHILE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Colo-Colo (C)	30	21	4	5	49	21	67
Universidad de Chile	30	19	8	3	53	24	65
Deportes Iquique	30	14	6	10	53	48	48
Palestino	30	13	7	10	46	33	46
Universidad Catolica	30	13	7	10	44	34	46
Union Espanola	30	13	6	11	53	45	45
Everton	30	12	9	9	47	41	45
Coquimbo Unido	30	12	9	9	37	34	45
Nublense	30	11	7	12	40	34	40
Audax Italiano	30	10	4	16	36	39	34
Union La Calera	30	9	7	14	29	40	34
Huachipato	30	9	7	14	28	44	34
Cobresal	30	8	9	13	42	51	33
O'Higgins	30	8	7	15	34	53	31
Cobreloa (R)	30	9	4	17	33	62	31
Deportes Copiapo (R)	30	7	3	20	40	61	24

COLOMBIA

Finalizacion

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Santa Fe*	19	10	7	2	26	12	37
America de Cali*	19	11	4	4	27	16	37
Millonarios*	19	10	5	4	27	13	35
Tolima*	19	10	4	5	25	12	34
Atletico Nacional* (C)	19	9	5	5	27	20	32
Junior*	19	8	7	4	26	16	31
Once Caldas*	19	9	4	6	21	19	31
Deportivo Pasto*	19	9	3	7	25	18	30
Independiente Medellin	19	7	8	4	23	15	29
Atletico Bucaramanga	19	8	4	7	21	17	28
Fortaleza	19	7	6	6	23	20	27
Deportivo Pereira	19	7	6	6	19	18	27
La Equidad	19	5	7	7	20	26	22
Aguilas Doradas	19	5	6	8	18	27	21
Patriotas	19	5	5	9	23	29	20
Alianza	19	4	5	10	17	25	17
Deportivo Cali	19	4	5	10	15	28	17
Jaguares	19	3	6	10	9	24	15
Boyaca Chico	19	4	3	12	13	34	15
Envigado	19	3	4	12	9	25	13

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Nacional* (C)	6	4	1	1	13	4	13
Millonarios	6	3	3	0	7	4	12
Deportivo Pasto	6	2	1	3	5	6	7
Santa Fe	6	0	1	5	2	13	1

*Advance to final

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tolima*	6	3	1	2	7	7	10
Once Caldas	6	2	3	1	8	5	9
Junior	6	2	1	3	7	8	7
America de Cali	6	2	1	3	6	8	7

*Advance to final

Final

Dec 19: Tolima 1-1 Atletico Nacional
Dec 22: Atletico Nacional 2-0 Tolima (agg 3-1)

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Finalizacion)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tolima	52	27	12	13	73	46	93
Santa Fe	52	26	13	13	61	41	91
Millonarios	50	24	14	12	68	42	86
Atl Bucaramanga* (C)	46	22	11	13	52	33	77
Once Caldas	50	21	14	15	50	44	77
Junior	50	20	15	15	62	51	75
Atletico Nacional (C)	46	20	13	13	64	45	73
America de Cali	44	19	12	13	55	40	69
Deportivo Pereira	44	19	12	13	54	44	69
Ind Medellin	38	15	13	10	45	46	58
Deportivo Pasto	44	16	8	20	45	45	56
La Equidad	44	14	13	17	45	54	55
Fortaleza	38	13	12	13	41	40	51
Aguilas Doradas	38	12	10	16	38	46	46
Deportivo Cali	38	9	11	18	39	52	38
Jaguares	38	8	13	17	26	44	37
Patriotas	38	9	8	21	31	54	35
Alianza	38	8	9	21	32	54	33
Boyaca Chico	38	9	6	23	35	69	33
Envigado	38	6	11	21	24	50	29

*Won Apertura

Relegation Table

	2022	2023	2024	GD*	P	Pts	Avg
Millonarios	74	68	66	+22	118	208	1.76
Tolima	66	61	72	+26	118	199	1.69
Ind Medellin	67	68	58	-1	118	193	1.64
Atletico Nacional	66	68	56	+8	118	190	1.61
Aguilas Doradas	58	83	46	-8	118	187	1.58
America de Cali	54	69	62	+17	118	185	1.57
Santa Fe	61	50	71	+24	118	182	1.54
Junior	63	58	60	+13	118	181	1.53
Atl Bucaramanga	59	46	66	+18	118	171	1.45
La Equidad	58	52	55	+2	118	165	1.4
Deportivo Pereira	55	44	61	+11	118	160	1.36
Once Caldas	56	42	60	+2	118	158	1.34
Fortaleza	—	—	51	+1	38	51	1.34
Deportivo Pasto	54	54	49	+1	118	157	1.33
Alianza	46	58	33	-22	118	137	1.16
Boyaca Chico	—	49	33	-34	78	82	1.05
Deportivo Cali	34	51	38	−13	118	123	1.04
Envigado	57	33	29	−26	118	119	1.01
Jaguares**(R)	47	33	37	−18	118	117	0.99
Patriotas**(R)	—	—	35	-23	38	35	0.92

*Goal difference for 2024 season only
**Relegated on points coefficient during current season and two previous seasons (2022 & 2023)

ECUADOR

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LDU Quito* (C)	15	11	2	2	33	14	35
Independiente del Valle	15	9	3	3	33	14	30
Universidad Catolica	15	8	2	5	28	24	26
Barcelona SC	15	7	4	4	30	21	25
Orense	15	7	4	4	18	16	25
Mushuc Runa	15	5	8	2	27	24	23
Libertad	15	6	5	4	20	18	23
Tecnico Universitario	15	6	4	5	25	15	22
Delfin	15	6	4	5	21	22	22
El Nacional	15	5	4	6	16	20	19
Aucas	15	4	4	7	16	22	16
Macara	15	4	3	8	15	27	15
Deportivo Cuenca**	15	4	4	7	15	21	13
Imbabura	15	3	2	10	17	31	11
Cumbaya	15	2	4	9	17	34	10
Emelec**	15	3	3	9	12	20	9

*Advance to final to play Apertura winner
**Deducted 3 points

Final

Dec 7: LDU Quito 3-0 Independiente del Valle
Dec 14: Ind del Valle 1-0 LDU Quito (agg 1-3)

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente del Valle	30	19	8	3	56	22	65
LDU Quito (C)	30	20	5	5	60	31	65
Barcelona	30	16	8	6	54	29	56
Universidad Catolica	30	15	6	9	59	44	51
Aucas	30	12	9	9	47	40	45
Mushuc Runa	30	10	11	9	45	43	41
El Nacional*	30	13	4	13	33	36	40
Orense	30	10	10	10	28	33	40
Tecnico Universitario	30	10	8	12	39	36	38
Emelec*	30	9	10	11	29	32	34
Macara	30	8	9	13	26	40	33
Delfin	30	8	7	15	29	45	31
Deportivo Cuenca*	30	7	11	12	40	45	29
Libertad**	30	7	10	13	28	43	27
Imbabura (R)	30	6	6	18	34	60	24
Cumbaya (R)	30	6	6	18	25	53	24

*Deducted 3 points
**Deducted 4 points

PARAGUAY

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia (C)	22	12	8	2	29	13	44
Guarani	22	7	14	1	22	15	35
2 de Mayo	22	9	7	6	25	18	34
Sportivo Ameliano	22	9	6	7	21	16	33
Nacional	22	8	9	5	22	16	33
Cerro Porteno	22	8	5	9	26	28	29
General Caballero (JLM)	22	6	10	6	18	21	28
Sportivo Luqueno	22	6	8	8	27	32	26
Libertad	22	7	5	10	23	29	26
Sportivo Trinidense	22	6	7	9	25	28	25
Sol de America	22	5	6	11	22	26	21
Tacuary	22	4	5	13	17	35	17

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia (C)	44	21	17	6	57	34	80
Libertad* (C)	44	21	11	12	65	45	74
Cerro Porteno	44	21	11	12	66	45	74
Guarani	44	15	21	8	53	40	66
2 de Mayo	44	18	11	15	53	43	65
Sportivo Luqueno	44	16	13	15	52	54	61
Sportivo Ameliano	44	15	11	18	38	48	56
Nacional	44	14	13	17	46	51	55
Sol de America	44	12	11	21	49	65	47
General Caballero (JLM)	44	9	20	15	40	57	47
Sportivo Trinidense	44	12	10	22	55	62	46
Tacuary	44	9	13	22	43	73	40

*Won Apertura

Relegation Table

	2022	2023	2024	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Libertad	91	99	74	132	264	2
Cerro Porteno	98	81	74	132	253	1.917
Olimpia	92	62	80	132	234	1.773
2 de Mayo	—	—	65	44	65	1.477
Nacional	71	65	55	132	191	1.447
Guarani	55	65	66	132	186	1.409
Sportivo Luqueno	—	51	61	88	112	1.273
Sportivo Trinidense	—	65	46	88	111	1.261
Sportivo Ameliano	48	57	56	132	161	1.22
General Caballero (JLM)	51	49	47	132	147	1.114
Sol de America* (R)	—	—	47	44	47	1.068
Tacuary* (R)	53	44	40	132	137	1.038

*Relegated on points coefficient during current season and two previous seasons (2022 & 2023)

PERU

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario* (C)	17	11	4	2	31	10	37
Alianza Lima	17	11	3	3	25	11	36
Sporting Cristal	17	10	4	3	47	15	34
Melgar	17	9	5	3	30	16	32
Atletico Grau	17	8	8	1	25	11	32
Cusco	17	9	4	4	28	23	31
Alianza Atletico	17	8	6	3	17	15	30
Cienciano	17	8	2	7	28	24	26
ADT	17	6	5	6	18	16	23
Deportivo Garcilaso	17	7	2	8	17	17	23
Sport Huancayo	17	5	4	8	21	28	19
Los Chankas	17	4	6	7	17	21	18
Carlos A. Mannucci	17	4	5	8	23	30	17
Sport Boys	17	4	4	9	14	31	16
UTC	17	3	6	8	14	24	15
Comerciantes Unidos	17	3	4	10	14	29	13
Universidad Cesar Vallejo	17	2	4	11	15	31	10
Union Comercio	17	2	2	13	13	45	8

*Universitario declared champions after winning Apertura and Clausura

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario (C)	34	23	8	3	63	17	77
Sporting Cristal	34	23	5	6	91	35	74
Melgar	34	21	7	6	66	35	70
Alianza Lima	34	22	3	9	57	27	69
Cusco	34	18	6	10	50	44	60
Cienciano	34	14	10	10	48	44	52
Atletico Grau	34	12	15	7	44	28	51
ADT	34	14	9	11	47	40	51
Alianza Atletico	34	11	11	12	28	34	44
Los Chankas	34	10	9	15	42	47	39
Sport Huancayo	34	10	8	16	39	57	38
Deportivo Garcilaso	34	10	7	17	37	43	37
Sport Boys	34	9	8	17	32	51	35
Comerciantes Unidos	34	9	8	17	36	60	35
UTC	34	7	10	17	35	53	31
Carlos A. Mannucci (R)	34	7	10	17	34	64	31
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (R)	34	6	12	16	34	55	30
Union Comercio (R)	34	3	8	23	30	79	17

URUGUAY

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol* (C)	15	12	2	1	32	5	38
Nacional	15	11	3	1	37	11	36
Racing	15	7	6	2	16	10	27
Boston River	15	8	2	5	19	15	26
Danubio	15	6	7	2	14	7	25
Cerro Largo	15	6	4	5	15	11	22
Defensor	15	5	5	5	17	17	20
Miramar Misiones	15	4	7	4	11	15	19
Liverpool	15	4	6	5	15	16	18
River Plate	15	5	3	7	15	20	18
Wanderers	15	4	5	6	15	20	17
Rampla Juniors	15	4	4	7	12	19	16
Fenix	15	4	2	9	14	28	14
Cerro	15	2	6	7	9	20	12
Deportivo Maldonado	15	2	3	10	12	24	9
Progreso	15	1	5	9	9	24	8

*Penarol declared champions after winning Apertura and Clausura

Aggregate table (Apertura, Intermedio & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol (C)	37	29	6	2	73	17	93
Nacional	37	26	8	3	86	32	86
Boston River	37	18	6	13	46	40	60
Defensor	37	16	11	10	55	39	59
Cerro Largo	37	15	9	13	37	34	54
Danubio	37	13	14	10	38	37	53
Racing	37	13	13	11	46	42	52
Wanderers	37	13	9	15	41	49	48
River Plate	37	10	10	17	43	54	40
Miramar Misiones	37	9	13	15	36	53	40
Progreso	37	10	10	17	42	60	40
Liverpool	37	9	12	16	41	50	39
Cerro	37	9	12	16	36	50	39
Rampla Juniors	37	10	9	18	35	58	39
Fenix	37	10	7	20	35	54	37
Deportivo Maldonado	37	7	9	21	31	52	30

Relegation Table

	2023	2024	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Penarol	69	93	162	74	2.189
Nacional	64	86	150	74	2.027
Defensor	60	59	119	74	1.608
Liverpool	72	39	111	74	1.5
Cerro Largo	50	54	104	74	1.405
Racing	50	52	102	74	1.378
Danubio	48	53	101	74	1.365
Boston River	41	60	101	74	1.365
Wanderers	50	48	98	74	1.324
River Plate	48	40	88	74	1.189
Cerro	43	39	82	74	1.108
Miramar Misiones	—	40	40	37	1.081
Progreso	—	40	40	37	1.081
Rampla Juniors* (R)	—	39	39	37	1.054
Fenix* (R)	37	37	74	74	1
Deportivo Maldonado* (R)	43	30	73	74	0.986

*Relegated on points coefficient during current and previous season

VENEZUELA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Tachira* (C)	13	7	6	0	17	5	27
Monagas*	13	7	4	2	22	14	25
Rayo Zuliano*	13	7	2	4	18	15	23
Estudiantes de Merida*	13	6	4	3	20	14	22
Carabobo*	13	5	5	3	17	13	20
Caracas*	13	5	5	3	15	12	20
Deportivo La Guaira*	13	5	5	3	13	11	20
Zamora*	13	6	2	5	15	14	20
UCV	13	5	4	4	18	17	19
Metropolitanos	13	4	6	3	16	16	18
Academia Puerto Cabello	13	2	6	5	13	15	12
Portuguesa	13	3	2	8	12	21	11
Angostura	13	1	3	9	9	20	6
Inter de Barinas	13	0	2	11	8	26	2

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Tachira* (C)	6	5	1	0	14	3	16
Rayo Zuliano	6	2	1	3	9	11	7
Caracas	6	2	0	4	7	10	6
Zamora	6	1	2	3	7	13	5

*Advance to final

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Carabobo*	6	4	2	0	9	2	14
Deportivo La Guaira	6	4	1	1	10	4	13
Estudiantes de Merida	6	2	0	4	6	11	6
Monagas	6	0	1	5	4	12	1

*Advance to final

Final

Nov 24: Deportivo Tachira 4-1 Carabobo

Final Absoluta

Dec 1: Deportivo Tachira 1-1 Carabobo
Dec 8: Carabobo 0-0 Deportivo Tachira
(agg 1-1, *Deportivo Tachira win 4-2 on pens*)

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Finalizacion)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Deportivo Tachira (C)	26	12	10	4	30	15	46
Universidad Central	26	11	11	4	35	25	44
Monagas	26	12	8	6	41	32	44
Carabobo	26	10	11	5	30	22	41
Deportivo La Guaira	26	10	10	6	27	25	40
Metropolitanos	26	10	9	7	35	34	39
Academia Puerto Cabello	26	7	11	8	28	26	32
Caracas	26	7	11	8	25	2	32
Portuguesa	26	9	5	12	29	33	32
Estudiantes de Merida	26	8	6	12	34	38	30
Rayo Zuliano	26	8	6	12	34	38	30
Angostura	26	8	6	12	25	33	30
Zamora	26	6	7	13	25	36	25
Inter de Barinas (R)	26	7	3	16	22	38	24

AFRICA

2024-25 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Dec 14 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1 (Fofana 41)
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Dube 90+4)

Dec 14 – Algiers
MC Alger (Alg) 0
Al Hilal (Sud) 1 (G. Fofana 76)

Jan 4 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 3 (Mzize 33, 60, Aziz Ki 56)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1 (Faty 16 pen)

Jan 5 – Nouakchott
Al Hilal (Sud) 1 (Girumugisha 78)
MC Alger (Alg) 1 (Bayazid 5)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal	4	3	1	0	6	2	10
MC Alger	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Young Africans	4	1	1	2	4	6	4
TP Mazembe	4	0	2	2	3	6	2

Group B

Dec 14 – Kinshasa
Maniema Union (Cod) 1 (Moanda 37)
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Carneiro 62)

Dec 15 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Rayners 65)
Raja (Mar) 0

Jan 4 – Meknes
AS FAR (Mar) 2 (Ait Ouarkhane 12, Zouhzouh 45+3)
Maniema Union (Cod) 0

Jan 4 – Casablanca
Raja (Mar) 1 (Benamar 45+2)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
AS FAR	4	2	2	0	6	2	8
M. Sundowns	4	1	2	1	2	2	5
Raja	4	1	1	2	2	4	4
Maniema Union	4	0	3	1	2	4	3

Group C

Dec 14 – Abidjan
Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 1 (Meite 53)
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 0

Dec 22 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 6 (Abou Ali 45+3, 51, 84, El Shahat 56, Tau 86, Ashour 90+3)
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Mahious 21)

Jan 3 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Khacef 90+1)
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Jan 4 – Johannesburg
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 3 (Mofokeng 22, Maswanganyi 50, Hotto 85)
Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Orlando Pirates	4	2	2	0	6	2	8
Al Ahly	4	2	1	1	10	4	7
CR Belouizdad	4	2	0	2	4	8	6
Stade d'Abidjan	4	0	1	3	3	9	1

Group D

Dec 14 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 2 (Belaili 36, Mokwana 45+3)
Pyramids (Egy) 0

Dec 15 – Bamako
Djoliba (Mli) 0
Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 0

Jan 5 – Luanda
Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 1 (Mussa 32)
Djoliba (Mli) 0

Jan 5 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 2 (Fathi 90, Adel 90+3)
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Belaili 56)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance	4	2	1	1	7	2	7
Pyramids	4	2	1	1	7	4	7
Sagrada Esperanca	4	1	2	1	2	5	5
Djoliba	4	0	2	2	0	5	2

2024-25 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Dec 15: Simba (Tan) 2-1 CS Sfaxien (Tun); Bravos do Maquis (Ang) 3-2 CS Constantine (Alg)
Jan 5: CS Constantine (Alg) 4-0 Bravos do Maquis (Ang); CS Sfaxien (Tun) 0-1 Simba (Tan)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CS Constantine	4	3	0	1	9	4	9
Simba	4	3	0	1	5	3	9
Bravos do Maquis	4	2	0	2	6	9	6
CS Sfaxien	4	0	0	4	3	7	0

Group B

Dec 15: RS Berkane (Mar) 1-0 Stade Malien (Mli); Desportivo Lunda Sul (Ang) 0-1 Stellenbosch (RSA)
Jan 5: Stellenbosch (RSA) 2-0 Desportivo Lunda Sul (Ang); Stade Malien (Mli) 0-1 RS Berkane (Mar)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RS Berkane	4	4	0	0	7	1	12
Stellenbosch	4	2	0	2	4	6	6
Stade Malien	4	1	1	2	3	2	4
Desportivo LS	4	0	1	3	1	8	1

Group C

Dec 15: Orapa United (Bot) 0-0 ASC Jaraaf (Sen); USM Alger (Alg) 3-0 ASEC Abidjan (Civ)
Jan 5: ASC Jaraaf (Sen) 1-0 Orapa United (Bot); ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 1-1 USM Alger (Alg)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger	4	2	2	0	10	1	8
ASEC Abidjan	4	1	2	1	3	4	5
ASC Jaraaf	4	1	2	1	1	2	5
Orapa United	4	0	2	2	0	7	2

Group D

Dec 15: Black Bulls (Moz) 3-0 Enyimba (Nga); Zamalek (Egy) 1-0 Al Masry (Egy)
Jan 5: Zamalek (Egy) 0-0 Al Masry (Egy); Black Bulls (Moz) 4-1 Enyimba (Nga)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek	4	2	2	0	5	2	8
Al Masry	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Black Bulls	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
Enyimba	4	1	1	2	6	8	4

ASIA

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Last 16 Draw – West Region

Al Khaldiya (Bhr) v Tractor (Irn); Al Wakrah (Qat) v Al Taawoun (KSA); Al Wehdat (Jor) v Shabab Al Ahli (UAE); Al Hussein Irbid (Jor) v Sharjah (UAE)
**Two-legged ties take place Feb 11-12 and 18-19*

Last 16 Draw – East Region

Nam Dinh (Vie) v Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn); Muangthong United (Tha) v Lion City Sailors (Sgp); Port (Tha) v Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor); Sydney FC (Aus) v Bangkok United (Tha)
**Two-legged ties take place Feb 12-13 and 19-20*

JAPAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vissel Kobe (C)	38	21	9	8	61	36	72
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	38	19	11	8	72	43	68
Machida Zelvia	38	19	9	10	54	34	66
Gamba Osaka	38	18	12	8	49	35	66
Kashima Antlers	38	18	11	9	60	41	65
Tokyo Verdy	38	14	14	10	51	51	56
FC Tokyo	38	15	9	14	53	51	54
Kawasaki Frontale	38	13	13	12	66	57	52
Yokohama F. Marinos	38	15	7	16	61	62	52
Cerezo Osaka	38	13	13	12	43	48	52
Nagoya Grampus	38	15	5	18	44	47	50
Avispa Fukuoka	38	12	14	12	33	38	50
Urawa Red Diamonds	38	12	12	14	49	45	48
Kyoto Sanga	38	12	11	15	43	55	47
Shonan Bellmare	38	12	9	17	53	58	45
Albirex Niigata	38	10	12	16	44	59	42
Kashiwa Reysol	38	9	14	15	39	51	41
Jubilo Iwata (R)	38	10	8	20	47	68	38
Consadole Sapporo (R)	38	9	10	19	43	66	37
Sagan Tosu (R)	38	10	5	23	48	68	35

TAIWAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tainan City (C)	21	15	4	2	60	16	49
Taichung Futuro	21	13	4	4	41	19	43
Hang Yuan	21	12	3	6	33	19	39
AC Taipei	21	11	3	7	35	23	36
Taipower	21	9	3	9	36	26	30
Leopard Cat	21	6	4	11	24	35	22
Ming Chuan University*	21	5	3	13	23	47	18
Taipei Vikings (R)	21	0	2	19	17	84	2

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

TAJIKISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Istiklol (C)	22	19	2	1	62	11	59
Khujand	22	13	4	5	38	16	43
Ravshan Kulob	22	11	8	3	33	17	41
CSKA Pamir	22	11	6	5	36	21	39
Vakhsh Bokhtar	22	11	2	9	26	21	35
Eskhata	22	10	5	7	34	34	35
Regar-TadAZ	22	9	6	7	21	15	33
Khosilot Farkhor	22	5	9	8	27	26	24
Barkchi Hisar	22	5	5	12	21	42	20
Istaravshan	22	4	5	13	17	32	17
Panjsher*	22	4	4	14	16	41	16
Kuktosh (R)	22	1	2	19	8	63	5

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Dec 3: Parvoz Bobojon Ghafurov 1-1 Panjsher
Dec 7: Panjsher 2-0 P. B. Ghafurov (agg 3-1)

TURKMENISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arkadag (C)	30	30	0	0	147	20	90
Ahal	30	22	1	7	68	29	67
Altyn Asyr	30	21	2	7	72	33	65
Sagadam	30	13	1	16	40	51	40
Merw	30	11	2	17	21	60	35
Asgabat	30	8	4	18	27	58	28
Nebitci	30	8	3	19	28	64	27
Kopetdag	30	4	5	21	18	69	17
Energetik	16	1	2	13	8	45	5

CONCACAF

BELIZE

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Verdes*	10	8	0	2	26	5	24
Port Layola* (C)	10	6	1	3	22	7	19
Progresso*	10	5	3	2	13	11	18
San Pedro Pirates*	10	4	4	2	15	12	16
Wagiya	10	1	1	8	12	32	4
Bandits	10	1	1	8	5	26	4

**Advance to finals stage*

Semi-Finals

Nov 10: San Pedro Pirates 1-1 Verdes; Progresso 2-4 Port Layola
Nov 24: Verdes 2-3 San Pedro Pirates (agg 3-4); Port Layola 2-1 Progresso (agg 6-3)

Final

Dec 1: San Pedro Pirates 0-3 Port Layola
Dec 8: Port Layola 1-1 San Pedro Pirates (agg 4-2)

COSTA RICA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alajuelense*	22	13	7	2	37	18	46
Saprissa*	22	12	5	5	37	28	41
San Carlos*	22	10	9	3	41	26	39
Herediano* (C)	22	10	5	7	34	28	35
Guanacasteca	22	10	5	7	26	31	35
Cartagines	22	10	4	8	33	29	34
Sporting San Jose	22	8	3	11	27	27	27
Municipal Liberia	22	7	5	10	32	30	26
Perez Zeledon	22	4	10	8	20	27	22
Santos de Guapiles	22	5	6	11	29	39	21
Santa Ana	22	5	5	12	22	39	20
Puntarenas	22	3	6	13	18	34	15

**Advance to finals stage*

Semi-Finals

Dec 7-8: San Carlos 2-2 Saprissa; Herediano 2-0 Alajuelense
Dec 11-12: Saprissa 2-0 San Carlos (agg 4-2); Alajuelense 2-2 Herediano (agg 2-4)

Final

Dec 15: Herediano 3-0 Saprissa
Dec 19: Saprissa 2-0 Herediano (agg 2-3)

EL SALVADOR

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aguila*	20	12	5	3	36	18	41
Cacahuatique*	20	13	1	6	24	16	40
Firpo*	20	12	3	5	32	28	39
Isidro Metapan*	20	10	5	5	31	21	35
Alianza*	20	9	5	6	26	16	32
Once Deportivo* (C)	20	9	5	6	26	23	32
Municipal Limeno*	20	7	6	7	24	22	27
FAS*	20	6	5	9	29	28	23
Fuerte San Francisco	20	4	3	13	15	34	15
Dragon	20	3	4	13	10	30	13
Platense	20	1	6	13	11	28	9

**Advance to finals stage*

Quarter-Finals

Dec 5-6: Once Deportivo 2-1 Firpo; FAS 1-1 Aguila; Alianza 1-1 Isidro Metapan; Municipal Limeno 0-1 Cacahuatique
Dec 8: Firpo 1-1 Once Deportivo (agg 2-3); Aguila 0-1 FAS (agg 1-2); Isidro Metapan 0-0 Alianza (agg 1-1, *Isidro Metapan win 5-3 on pens*); Cacahuatique 0-1 Municipal Limeno (agg 1-1, *Cacahuatique win 3-1 on pens*)

Semi-Finals

Dec 12: FAS 2-1 Isidro Metapan; Once Deportivo 1-1 Cacahuatique
Dec 15: Isidro Metapan 0-0 FAS (agg 1-2); Cacahuatique 1-1 Once Deportivo (agg 2-2, *Once Deportivo win 5-3 on pens*)

Final

Dec 22: FAS 1-2 Once Deportivo (*AET*)

GUATEMALA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Xelaju* (C)	16	8	6	2	26	9	30
Municipal*	16	8	6	2	25	15	30
Coban Imperial*	16	7	4	5	25	16	25
Malacateco*	16	7	4	5	19	13	25
Xinabajul*	16	7	4	5	26	24	25
Comunicaciones*	16	7	3	6	24	23	24
Antigua GFC*	16	6	5	5	27	24	23
Mixco*	16	6	4	6	15	19	22
Achuapa	16	5	6	5	15	17	21
Guastatoya	16	2	8	6	15	19	14
Marquense	16	2	6	8	11	26	12
Deportivo Zacapa	16	0	6	10	5	28	6

**Advance to finals stage*

Quarter-Finals

Nov 28-29: Comunicaciones 1-0 Coban Imperial; Xinabajul 2-0 Malacateco; Mixco 0-0 Xelaju; Antigua GFC 0-0 Municipal
Nov 30-Dec 2: Coban Imperial 2-1 Comunicaciones (agg 2-2, *Coban Imperial win 5-3 on pens*); Malacateco 0-0 Xinabajul (agg 0-2); Municipal 2-2 Antigua GFC (agg 2-2, *Antigua GFC win 4-1 on pens*); Xelaju 1-0 Mixco (agg 1-0)

Semi-Finals

Dec 5-6: Xinabajul 0-0 Coban Imperial; Antigua GFC 1-1 Xelaju
Dec 7-9: Coban Imperial 1-1 Xinabajul (agg 1-1, *Coban Imperial win 5-4 on pens*); Xelaju 1-0 Xelaju (agg 2-1)

Final

Dec 14: Coban Imperial 2-0 Xelaju
Dec 22: Xelaju 3-0 Coban Imperial (agg 3-2)

HONDURAS

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia*	18	11	5	2	38	15	38
Motagua* (C)	18	10	4	4	37	21	34
Real Espana**	18	8	5	5	20	14	29
Marathon**	18	6	7	5	23	21	25
Olancho**	18	6	6	6	26	20	24
Genesis**	18	5	6	7	23	28	21
UPNFM	18	6	3	9	18	31	21
Victoria	18	5	5	8	30	32	20
Juticalpa	18	4	5	9	13	29	17
Real Sociedad	18	2	8	8	17	34	14

**Advance to semi-finals*
***Advance to play-offs*

Play-Offs

Dec 5:
Olancho 1-2 Marathon; Genesis 1-1 Real Espana
Dec 7-8: Marathon 1-2 Olancho (agg 3-3, *Olancho win 9-8 on pens*); Real Espana 2-0 Genesis (agg 3-1)

Semi-Finals

Dec 12-13:
Olancho 1-1 Olimpia; Real Espana 0-2 Motagua
Dec 15: Olimpia 3-0 Olancho (agg 4-1); Motagua 1-0 Real Espana (agg 3-0)

Final

Dec 20: Motagua 1-1 Olimpia
Dec 23: Olimpia 0-1 Motagua (agg 1-2)

MEXICO

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cruz Azul*	17	13	3	1	39	12	42
Toluca*	17	10	5	2	38	16	35
Tigres UANL*	17	10	4	3	25	15	34
Pumas UNAM*	17	9	4	4	21	13	31
Monterrey*	17	9	4	4	26	19	31
Atletico San Luis*	17	9	3	5	27	19	30
Tijuana**	17	8	5	4	24	25	29
America** (C)	17	8	3	6	27	21	27
Guadalajara**	17	7	4	6	24	15	25
Atlas**	17	5	7	5	17	23	22
Leon	17	3	9	5	21	23	18
Juarez	17	5	2	10	22	36	17
Necaxa	17	3	6	8	20	26	15
Mazatlan	17	2	8	7	10	19	14
Puebla	17	4	2	11	17	31	14
Pachuca	17	3	4	10	20	29	13
Queretaro	17	3	3	11	13	31	12
Santos Laguna	17	2	4	11	12	30	10

**Advance to quarter-finals*
***Advance to play-ins*

Play-Ins

Nov 21 – Tijuana
Tijuana 2 (Bilbao 15, Zuniga 53)
America 2 (B. Rodriguez 51, Borja 90+1)
America win 4-3 on pens

Nov 21 – Zapopan
Guadalajara 1 (Guzman 59)
Atlas 2 (Castillo 85 og, Rocha 90+14 pen)

Play-Off

Nov 24 – Tijuana
Tijuana 3 (Zuniga 4, 20, Castaneda 84)
Atlas 0

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Nov 27 – Tijuana
Tijuana 3 (Zuniga 10, Alvarez 19, Reynoso 42)
Cruz Azul 0

Nov 27 – Mexico City
America 2 (Aguirre 67, 82)
Toluca 0

Nov 28 – San Luis Potosi
Atletico San Luis 3 (Joaquim 30 og, Bonatini 60, Vitinho 64)
Tigres UANL 0

Nov 28 – Guadalupe
Monterrey 1 (Canales 90 pen)
Pumas UNAM 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Nov 30 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul 3 (Rivero 44, Giakoumakis 54, Sepulveda 74)
Tijuana 0
3-3 on aggregate. Cruz Azul advance due to higher placing in league table

Nov 30 – Toluca
Toluca 0
America 2 (Ruiz 49 og, Martin 72)
America win 4-0 on aggregate

Dec 1 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL 0
Atletico San Luis 0
Atletico San Luis win 3-0 on aggregate

Dec 1 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM 3 (Martinez 36, 87, Pussetto 66)
Monterrey 5 (Berterame 32, 73, Ocampos 56, Arteaga 79, Torres 90+3)
Monterrey win 6-3 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Dec 4 – San Luis Potosi
Atletico San Luis 2 (Bonatini 30, Chavez 80)
Monterrey 1 (Berterame 66)

Dec 5 – Mexico City
America 0
Cruz Azul 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 7 – Guadalupe
Monterrey 5 (Torres 47, 85, Berterame 52, Guillen 82 og, Vazquez 90+1)
Atletico San Luis 1 (Salles-Lamonge 75 pen)
Monterrey win 6-3 on aggregate

Dec 8 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul 3 (Rivero 68, Fernandez 80, Morales 86)
America 4 (Zendejas 15, R. Sanchez 49, Juarez 72, Aguirre 90+4 pen)
America win 4-3 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

Dec 12 – Puebla
America 2 (Alvarez 39, Zendejas 49)
Monterrey 1 (Canales 35)

Final – 2nd Leg

Dec 15 – Guadalupe
Monterrey 1 (Rojas 85)
America 1 (R. Sanchez 21)
America win 3-2 on aggregate

NICARAGUA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Diriangen* (C)	18	12	4	2	54	15	40
Real Esteli*	18	10	6	2	36	14	36
Matagalpa**	18	8	7	3	30	22	31
Walter Ferretti**	18	8	5	5	21	15	29
Sport Sebaco**	18	6	6	6	24	20	24
Managua**	18	7	3	8	28	27	24
Municipal Jalapa	18	5	5	8	18	29	20
UNAN Managua	18	5	4	9	19	34	19
Rancho Santana	18	3	3	12	14	40	12
Deportivo Ocotal	18	3	3	12	15	43	12

*Advance to semi-finals
**Advance to play-offs

Play-Offs

Dec 1: Walter Ferretti 1-0 Sport Sebaco; Matagalpa 1-5 Managua

Semi-Finals

Dec 8: Managua 1-1 Diriangen; Walter Ferretti 1-4 Real Esteli
Dec 15: Diriangen 1-1 Managua (agg 2-2, *Diriangen win 3-1 on pens*); Real Esteli 1-1 Walter Ferretti (agg 5-2)

Final

Dec 17: Real Esteli 1-1 Diriangen
Dec 21: Diriangen 3-2 Real Esteli (agg 4-3)

PUERTO RICO

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academia Quintana* (C)	9	8	1	0	58	3	25
Metropolitan*	9	7	1	1	35	9	22
Caguas Sporting*	9	6	1	2	40	15	19
PR Surf*	9	4	1	4	19	17	13
San Juan	9	4	1	4	17	18	13
MK Elite	9	4	1	4	20	30	13
Mayaguez	9	2	4	3	16	26	10
PR Sol	9	3	1	5	9	29	10
Caribe	9	1	1	7	11	42	4
Fraigcomar	9	0	0	9	5	41	0

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 7-8: Metropolitan 3-0 Caguas Sporting; Academia Quintana 3-1 PR Surf

Final

Dec 15: Academia Quintana 2-1 Metropolitan

UNITED STATES: MLS CUP 2024

Eastern Conference Round One – Match 1

Oct 25 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami 2 (Suarez 2, Alba 60)
Atlanta United 1 (Lobjanidze 39)

Oct 27 – Orlando
Orlando City 2 (Torres 32, Ojeda 76)
Charlotte FC 0

Oct 28 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 1 (Asad 51)
New York City FC 0

Oct 29 – Columbus
Columbus Crew 0
New York Red Bulls 1 (Carballo 25)

Eastern Conference Round One – Match 2

Nov 1 – Charlotte
Charlotte FC 0
Orlando City 0
Charlotte FC win 3-1 on pens

Nov 2 – Atlanta
Atlanta United 2 (Williams 58, Silva 90+4)
Inter Miami 1 (Martinez 40)

Nov 2 – New York
New York City FC 3 (Martinez 22, Thiago Martins 40, Rodriguez 90+7 pen)
FC Cincinnati 1 (Orellano 65)

Nov 3 – Harrison
NY Red Bulls 2 (Vanzeir 64, Forsberg 80 pen)
Columbus Crew 2 (Arfsten 55, Ramirez 90+6)
NY Red Bulls win 5-4 on pens and the series 2-0

Eastern Conference Round One – Match 3

Nov 9 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami 2 (Rojas 17, Messi 65)
Atlanta United 3 (Thiare 19, 21, Slisz 76)
Atlanta United win the series 2-1

Nov 9 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati 0
New York City FC 0
New York City win 6-5 on pens and the series 2-1

Nov 9 – Orlando
Orlando City 1 (Torres 90+12)
Charlotte FC 1 (Swiderski 81)
Orlando City win 4-1 on pens and the series 2-1

Western Conference Round One – Match 1

Oct 26 – Carson
LA Galaxy 5 (Joveljic 32, 75, Nelson 52, Puig 54, 87)
Colorado Rapids 0

Oct 27 – Los Angeles
LAFC 2 (Bouanga 30 pen, Olivera 57)
Vancouver Whitecaps 1 (Gauld 90+5)

Oct 28 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 0
Houston Dynamo 0
Seattle Sounders win 5-4 on pens

Oct 29 – Sandy
Real Salt Lake 0
Minnesota United 0
Minnesota United win 5-4 on pens

Western Conference Round One – Match 2

Nov 1 – Commerce City
Colorado Rapids 1 (Larraz 19)
LA Galaxy 4 (Gabriel Pec 8, Paintsil 45+3, Puig 90+1, 90+4)
LA Galaxy win the series 2-0

Nov 2 – Saint Paul
Minnesota United 1 (Rosales 53)
Real Salt Lake 1 (Eneli 75)
Minnesota Utd win 3-1 on pens and the series 2-0

Nov 3 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps 3 (Gauld 10, Hollingshead 13 og, Segura 68 og)
LAFC 0

Nov 3 – Houston
Houston Dynamo 1 (C. Roldan 90+3 og)
Seattle Sounders 1 (C. Roldan 87)
Seattle Sounders win 7-6 on pens and the series 2-0

Western Conference Round One – Match 3

Nov 8 – Los Angeles
LAFC 1 (Bogusz 62)
Vancouver Whitecaps 0
LAFC win the series 2-1

Eastern Conference Semi-Finals

Nov 23 – New York
New York City FC 0
New York Red Bulls 2 (Carballo 16, Vanzeir 25)

Nov 24 – Orlando
Orlando City 1 (Enrique 39)
Atlanta United 0

Western Conference Semi-Finals

Nov 23 – Los Angeles
LAFC 1 (Hollingshead 50)
Seattle Sounders 2 (Chanot 59 og, Morris 109)
After Extra-Time

Nov 24 – Carson
LA Galaxy 6 (Gabriel Pec 1, 50, Joveljic 18, 89, Paintsil 37, 86)
Minnesota United 2 (Yeboah 6, 45+4 pen)

Eastern Conference Final

Nov 30 – Orlando
Orlando City 0
New York Red Bulls 1 (Reyes 47)

Western Conference Final

Nov 30 – Carson
LA Galaxy 1 (Joveljic 85)
Seattle Sounders 0

MLS Cup 2024

Dec 7 – Carson
LA Galaxy 2 (Paintsil 9, Joveljic 13)
New York Red Bulls 1 (S. Nealis 28)
LA Galaxy: McCarthy – Yamane, Garces, Yoshida, Nelson; Delgado, Cerrillo, Brugman (Reus 75); Gabriel Pec, Joveljic (Fagundez 78), Paintsil (Neal 90+4).
New York Red Bulls: Coronel – D. Nealis (Burke 84), Elie, S. Nealis; Harper, Stroud (Donkor 65), Edelman (Carmona 84), Tolkin; Forsberg; Vanzeir (Elias Manoel 65), Morgan.

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